CLOUDY IN THE WEST

WILLIAM PATTERSON WHITE

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By William Patterson White

THE OWNER OF THE LAZY D
LYNCH LAWYERS
THE RIDER OF GOLDEN BAR
THE WAGON WHEEL
THE TWISTED FOOT
THE BUSTER
SWEETWATER RANGE
CLOUDY IN THE WEST

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By

WILLIAM PATTERSON WHITE

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1928

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Published February, 1928

Printed in the United States of America

To My Cousins
OLIVE and ALBERT
in Independence, Kansas

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CLOUDY IN THE WEST

CHAPTER ONE

AURELIAN O'RILEY

I

On a certain warm and sunny Election Day in that elastic era when men said that "West of the Trinity there is no Sunday, and west of the Pecos there is no God," Aurelian O'Riley and his brother George, joint owners of the Drag R ranch and brand, were sitting under a cottonwood in Tularosa Draw discussing politics and a bottle of Old Crow. Which latter had been an unexpected gift from Heaven, borne to them by a messenger in the shape of a freighter friend carrying supplies to the Triangle E, who had had the misfortune to snap a breeching rolling down into the draw and was engaged in effecting rawhide repairs when the brothers, Rosebud-bound to vote, rode into the depression from the opposite side. The freighter was in a hurry to make the ranch under Salinas Peak and return to his regular Rosebud-El Paso route before a rival stole his trade, and Aurelian and George were in no less haste to cast their votes and return to their ranch, so of course repairs were dropped, political duties were forgotten, and the three friends sat down upon a blanket to draw poker.

"Five-handed is my choice," said the freighter. "But three is better than no game a-tall. There's a new gal in town."

Aurelian pricked his ears. He was a young man and interested in girls. "Dance or hashery?" asked Aurelian.

"Neither. She's at the hotel. Dressed fine as frawg's hair. Nothin' gaudy. Refined like. A sure-enough lady."

"You're a judge?" grinned Aurelian.

"I was raised right," said the freighter loftily, "and

while associatin' with low-down gormed-up ends of misspent lives like yourselves has more or less sundried and wind-shook my judgment. I know when a gal wears a blue silk dress, silk stockings, a red hat, carries a parasol, and walks on her high heels like a race horse perambulatin' to water, she's a lady. The other kind don't walk; they stub—like my mules goin' downhill."

George laughed. He was likewise a young man, but girls held no interest for him. "You forgot to mention the color of her hair and how long her eyewinkers are," was his sarcastic comment.

"Black hair, blue eyes matchin' her dress, and you could hang your hat on her eyewinkers anywhere."

"Bein' a orphan from way back, I don't lay any claims to the moral training of Freighter Philip here, but you've been to Chicago, Reely. Would a real lady let you hang your hat on her eyewinkers?"

"Well," said Aurelian judiciously, "if this blue lady let Philip hang that figure-four rabbit trap of his he thinks is a hat on her eyewinkers, I'd take fifty per cent off the lady. Did you try to, Philip?"

"I did not. When you get through rifflin' those cards we'll have a game maybe."

"No hurry," said Aurelian composedly, continuing to shuffle. "But I'm ashamed for you, Philip. You'd oughta made a stab at the hat-hangin' and proved your case. A pure quill freighter will try anythin' once. He wouldn't be a freighter otherwise."

"Say, this ain't any benefit. You're wearin' the spots off those pasteboards. If you think you need practice in shufflin', give 'em here and learn somethin' from a real player."

"Here I come. Dollar ante. Jacks or better."

Philip the freighter lost his money, he lost his watch, he lost one of his two revolvers, he lost his whisky. Then he quit. "Which I'm lucky not to lose my shirt and

pants and Winchester," said he in sorrow. "They're my own cards too, and I thought I had 'em trained for you scoundrels. Why, I marked the backs myself."

"So did I—with my thumbnail," said Aurelian gently. "You noticed I shuffled those cards quite a spell—at first."

II

"Good whisky," observed George, smacking his lips.

Aurelian took the bottle from him and shook it. Then he held it against the light. "You ought to know. You drank most of it," said he reproachfully, and hastily sucked down the remainder.

"You know, Reely," George said, disregarding the veiled rebuke and comfortably settling his back against a leaning cottonwood and teetering his feet on the rowels of his spurs, "you know the more I lapped up that corn the less I wanted to go to town. I'm right comfortable here, and what's the difference? Those thieves yonder probably won't count our votes, anyway."

"If it was an honest count Shotgun Maxwell might stand a show of wearin' the sheriff's star," rejoined Aurelian, gloomily shaking a bottle that refused to utter the tiniest swash. "The votin' will be mighty close."

"Sure, fellers like us and the town folks will all vote for Shotgun, who's straight as a new tenpenny, but it's those big outfits up north who are ridin' the horse now, and they're due to make mighty certain they'll keep on in the saddle. They're the boys will reëlect Mister Jawn Cahoon, they and Mister Jawn's crooked election officials, together with the fact that Shotgun is in bed with a busted leg and can't look out for his interests."

"What this country needs is about forty fellers with two backbones apiece. To say nothin' of six arms per fellah, with a blazin' six-shooter in each five fingers. Then let freedom ring; long may she wave. You know

what? I've got a healthy mind to make it a honest vote."

"You and who else?"

"You."

"Me?"

"You. Speakin' personal, although I didn't get my fair share of Old Crow, right now I feel I'm good as twenty men with arms like centipedes, and you ought to feel likewise."

"Centipedes don't have arms," pointed out George.

"You know what I mean, and the more I think of it, the more I know this country needs reformin'—bad. There's too much promiscuous rustlin' goin' on, and too much arrestin' the rustlers so they can be turned loose without a stain on their characters. You can't lynch a man for a trick he's turned after he's set free on the charge. A rustler should be stretched first, and tried afterwards—if any."

"It's hard enough to get the evidence on a rustler anyway, without havin' the law jump in and spoil the fun," mourned George.

"It's happened six times in the last year. All ready for a nice quiet little necktie party and the sheriff and his deputies horn in and remove the subject of the festivities. You know, Georgianna, sometimes I wake up at night with an uneasy feelin' that Jawn Cahoon is in cahoots with these big outfits up north that are gettin' fat off our li'l bunches."

"I've had the same feelin'," said George dryly. "I thought it was indigestion."

"No indigestion. It's the truth. And there's other things too that shouldn't be."

"For instance?"

"Murder of Sam Sheardown last June."

"You still harpin' on that! Why, it was a plain open-and-shut case. Sam Sheardown booted that half-breed—what was his name?—Yeah, White Mountain Pete—from

Ash Canon in the San Andreas—and Pete just naturally followed him down the trail that night and killed him. Nothin' to that."

"I know, but it's a fine thing, ain't it, when a white man gets killed for kickin' a half-breed? Pete got away clean too. There's law and order for you."

"Not our fault. We did enough ridin'."

"It was Sheriff Jawn Cahoon's fault. He was neck deep in a game of draw when Minnesota brought the word that Sam's team had come in without Sam and the buckboard seat one soppin' mess o' blood. Did Jawn get active *pronto?* Bein' three hundred in the hole, he did not. He waited until he was ahead of the game, ten hours later, before startin' to organize a posse. Black dark by then, so they had to wait until next day, givin' White Mountain Pete all the time he needed to make a getaway."

"Well, Minnesota and us and Ruidoso Red did what we could."

"We did, but on a cold trail like that we needed all the men in town, and the lazy scoundrels just sat back on their hunkers and waited for the sheriff to swear 'em in at two dollars a day. There wouldn't have been any money in it if they'd thrown in with us."

"Well, they scattered round plenty when they once started."

"Sure, when it was too late. Fine business, and a fine sheriff! What could four men do in a sandstorm blowin' for Gawd's sake and coverin' up every track, but eighty would have come through. I tell you flat, George, if it hadn't been for Cahoon, White Mountain Pete would have had his neck stretched six inches longer than it ever grew. It makes me plenty sick. Sam Sheardown was as fine a fellah as ever forked a hull."

George nodded. "That's so."

"And then what happens?" pursued Aurelian, who by

this time was simmering with his subject. "Four Ace Dineen saw his chance, the cold-blooded tripe scrap, and boarded a mortgage on Sam's ranch and cattle and said he bought it from Hank Slipe the notary, who claimed he'd lent Sam money on the mortgage the very day he was killed."

"That was kind of raw."

"Raw! It's so raw the cow's still kickin'. But who's to say different?"

"Didn't Sam have a sister some'ers?"

"I heard him say so more than once. Widow lady. Mrs. Gordon. Lives in one of those big cities—Omaha, or St. Louis, or Sandusky, Ohoho. Back in the States, anyways. But they couldn't get track of her. Ol' judge, he wrote, and the postmaster back there said she'd gone to Europe on a tower and all letters had been returned to him by some banker folks in Europe, sayin' party could not be located."

"Don't they have to advertise in the papers when heirs can't be located?"

"Sure, for four months, and they did. Two real prominent papers, the *Green Rock Clarion* and the *Tucumcari Longhorn,* so a missin' lady travelin' in Europe would be sure to see the notice in the mornin' at breakfast."

"Four months must be up soon."

"They were up last week. Probate judge allowed Four Ace's claim, and nobody appearin' to buy in the ranch, Four Ace is now owner of one fine ranch property. And all it cost him was one forged mortgage and a slice to square Sockless Hank, the pronghorn!"

"Maybe the pronghorn and Four Ace put Pete up to killin' Sam."

"Maybe they did. One guess is as good as another in this country where law ain't and a six-shooter is. Oh, I'm tellin' you, Georgianna, a li'l reform would go good around here. I've got a damhealthy mind—"

"It's a good thing for your damhealthy mind you didn't drink any more of that whisky," interposed George. "You're aimin' to go out and get yourself killed."

"You and me both," Aurelian corroborated cheerfully, and flung away the bottle. "I hear a horse. Ol' Sheriff McGee," he added a moment later, as a horseman issued from a small cottonwood and poplar grove south of where they were sitting.

Sheriff Mooney McGee of La Luz County, who must not by any means be confounded with Sheriff Cahoon of Rosebud County, in which latter county Aurelian O'Riley and his brother George owned their ranch and cast their votes, was not an old man. But custom frequently prefixed the adjective "old" to any one holding a worth-while political office. The sheriff was not more than thirty, with a merry face and pleasant eyes whose amiability several years of dealing with the criminal element had failed to dim. He and Aurelian and George had punched cows together as boys on the Triangle E and the friendship of the three was deep. Hence the personal abuse at every meeting.

"How much mileage will you eat up to-day, Mooney, old coffee cooler?" Aurelian wished to know immediately.

"You'd be surprised," smiled the sheriff, checking his horse in front of them.

"No wonder La Luz is so poor they can't take up the scrip," contributed George. "I hear those two wolf hunters up at Three Springs ain't been able to collect a dime for scalps since you took office, Mooney, on account of all the county's loose change goes to pay your travelin' expenses."

"You think that's right, Mooney," asked Aurelian, "to let those miserable coyote chasers starve around the hills that way, while you get fat and sassy and ride a good horse and wear gold watch chains big as freight-wagon traces?"

"I should think your liquor would choke you," said George.

"None of that liquor won't choke me," rejoined the sheriff, eyeing the recently full bottle where it glistened in the sun. "I'm thirsty too, and you drunkards had to lap it all up."

"If we'd known you were comin', we'd have saved you a smell, anyway. Wouldn't we, George?"

"Sure would. Anythin' on your mind or in it but your hat and that bowlful of mush you try to think with?"

"Trouble with you, George," said the sheriff gravely, "you haven't sense enough to recognize brains when you meet 'em in broad daylight. If you had, you wouldn't be consortin' openly with that cow thief callin' himself your brother. I often wonder what his real name is? But I s'pose I'd have to arrest him if I knew. Got somethin' funny to show you fellahs." He produced a folded copy of the Santa Fé *New Mexican* from a saddle pocket and tossed it to Aurelian. "Read that notice on the second page."

Aurelian, George looking over his shoulder, read the notice casually. He read it again carefully. Then, with the wild unearthly scream of a panther calling to its mate, he sprang upright, striking George a severe blow on the nose with his shoulder, and performed an interpretive dance on the greensward, accompanying himself with further shrieks that are customarily peculiar to the cougar of the hills.

At the first long howl the sheriff's horse lost his mind and the sheriff lost his hat. After a moment Aurelian became calm, but not so the sheriff's horse. It continued to pitch roughly among the cottonwoods, while the sheriff swore and beat it between the ears with the handle of his quirt.

"Ain't that a pretty sight?" commented Aurelian, viewing the exhibition with pleasure.

"Ain't my nose a pretty sight!" snuffled George, applying a blue bandanna to the organ in question. "What in hell's the matter with you, Reely? It's like to spoiled my new shirt."

"It'll wash. See that horse sunfish! If ol' sheriff only gets throwed I'll wash that shirt myself. Ee-yow! I'll bet he felt that one! Don't they do it enthusiastic when the spirit moves 'em? Ride him, cowboy, ride him! Let him get his head back to his hocks, and give him a real chance to bow up."

But the sheriff at last pulled up the wild-eyed head and with one final blow of the loaded quirt butt brought the frantic horse to see reason. He spurred back to the pair under the cottonwood and profanely asked Aurelian if he had gone mad.

"I always thought you were crazy, and now I know it. You burro-minded fool hen, the horse stepped right on my hat."

"George bloodied his shirt too. I'm sorry. But honest, Mooney, you don't know how you've brightened the day. I wouldn't have missed it for a farm in Missouri."

"So-and-so and such-and-such!" the sheriff exclaimed in part. "I like to broke my neck. And if I had you'd say you were sorry, huh?"

"I'd send flowers. You miss the point, Mooney. It ain't me who's the fool hen. It's you and George."

"For having truck with you a-tall? Yeah, I believe you. My hat's all tore to pieces."

"My nose'll never be the same again," George continued to snuffle from behind his bandanna.

"I'll get you a new hat, Sheriff, and George, I'll rub your nose with liniment three times a day if you'll only set quiet and lemme explain why you're both chuckleheads."

The sheriff slid purposefully from his saddle and together with George charged upon Aurelian. He danced

backward, waving the paper, and yelled, "Wait! wait! Lemme explain this here notice, what it means, in the *New Mexican,* and then if you want to roughhouse me, you can hop to it. Wait, you idjits! and I'll show you the biggest joke since the flood."

"*Another* joke!" squealed the injured pair, but Aurelian's earnestness and their own curiosity overcame their desire for vengeance. They held off, bidding him explain and make good, else grief would be his.

"First, I want to know if anybody this side the mountains has a copy of this paper."

"They couldn't have," said the sheriff. "There's a freight wreck at Lava Station—two engines and twenty cars on the ground and two hundred feet of track torn up. Mail to El Paso will be tied up for days. I came straight from Lava, where I got the paper."

"Did you meet anybody crossin' the Jornada or Stanton Gap?"

"Nobody passed me, comin' or goin'. You two are the first fellahs, if I can call you a fellah, Reely, without lyin', since I left the railroad."

"Then that's all right. Listen—"

III

"I got a li'l business over at Brown's ranch," said the sheriff, his gray eyes dancing. "I'll stay there until it's time."

"I'll be expectin' you, Mooney," said Aurelian. "It's possible I may need a li'l help."

"You're a modest cuss. Speakin' personal, it's my opinion you can swing this bull by the tail on your lonesome. That is, you and George."

"Thanks, Mooney," drawled George. "You needn't take any credit from Reely. He's welcome to all of it."

"That's all right," Aurelian said, busy with the mak-

ings. "You fellows trail me and you'll get somewhere. I have these ideas all the time."

"Might as well stay right here," observed George, when the sheriff and his horse had departed in the direction of Brown's ranch.

"Yeah, it's as cool as anywhere. Wish we had another bottle. It's thirsty weather."

"Lend me your hat and I can get me a drink from the spring."

"Use your own. Mine's new. The march of progress is sure filling this draw with folks to-day. Lookit, comin' over the hill."

"It's Bill Strong's buckboard and mules, but it ain't Bill drivin'. He never wore a white hat in his life."

"See who's with him?"

"Sure. Blue dress, red hat, and parasol."

The buckboard dropped sidewise into a dry ditch. Red hat and parasol swayed to the motion. White hat swayed too. The man's arm rubbed the girl's. Shoulders clung—an unnecessarily long time, it seemed to Aurelian. His straight black brows drew together somewhat. His mouth hardened.

"Crowdin' her," he observed softly, and slid upright.

The mule driver cramped his wheels to avoid a deep chuck hole. "Trunk and two grips on back of the buckboard," remarked George, who had not risen. "Must be bride and groom."

Aurelian shook his head slightly. "That's Four Ace Dineen drivin'. He's got a wife he's still livin' with."

"I see his yaller mustache now. I didn't notice it before. He has bought him a new hat for the occasion. She must be one of his kind of women, after all. Philip's a fool."

"And you're another," Aurelian declared, with a barely perceptible movement of the mouth. The buckboard was not far away. "Look at her face. She's sweet, that girl."

"So's sugar, and it comes in all kinds of bags."

"George, don't!"

George barely caught the whisper, but he understood. Aurelian was having one of his funny fits. Let him have it. A man learns to take it from a brother who is also a friend.

Again the barely perceptible flutter of Aurelian's lips. "This is the road to the Lazy S, and since Sam's three boys quit, there ain't anybody there but those two Mexicans Four Ace put in to hold the place down till he took hold. Four Ace is one *malo hombre* himself, and me, I don't like the looks of this. I never *did* like the looks of him."

The buckboard was not two rods away when Aurelian lounged into the middle of the road.

"Howdy, Four Ace," said Aurelian with a beaming smile, and lifted his hat to the lady.

The mules, always glad of an excuse to sag the traces, stopped and stood three-legged. The yellow mustache of Four Ace Dineen lifted to show teeth well-browned by tobacco.

"H' are you, Reely," he returned in a pleasant voice that was entirely at variance with the expression of his eyes.

Aurelian remained the picture of negligence. He bowed to the lady, raised an indolent leg, set his boot sole on the hub of a front wheel, and grinned at Four Ace. "Got plenty water? It's a long hitch to the Lazy S," he cast at a venture.

"We're fixed up," Four Ace replied gruffly, and raised the reins hintingly.

But Aurelian had had a good look at the girl. He knew that his snap judgment had not done her justice. She *was* sweet, but more than that she was good and very lovely. Sleek hair showed beneath the rim of the small red hat; her brunette complexion was clear as a baby's,

and her black eyes held a look as open and candid as a young boy's. It was her eyes that settled the matter for Aurelian. This girl could have no business with Four Ace Dineen.

Aurelian kept his foot where it was. "Where are your manners, Four Ace?" Aurelian said firmly.

Four Ace's pale face flushed. He mumbled an introduction. Aurelian dropped his foot to the ground, swept off his hat and looked at the girl. "Excuse me, I didn't catch the name."

"Mrs.—" began the girl, but Four Ace broke in so loudly with, "We got to be going!" that the name was lost. "So long, Aurelian. See you later."

The starting mules sat back in the breechings as Aurelian's hand closed on the reins. "No hurry, Four Ace," said Aurelian. "You'll excuse me again, but I didn't catch that name."

"Mrs. Gordon," said the girl clearly, her eyes questioning and perplexed. "Perhaps you know my brother, Sam, Mister—I didn't catch your name, either."

Aurelian did not reply. He was staring fixedly at Four Ace. The latter's fingers twitched on the reins. Then his nerve snapped. Like a flash of light, the right hand moved. But Aurelian's left moved as swiftly, and held the gambler's hand fast against the vest pocket where a derringer lay.

"Some other time," said Aurelian calmly. "You're gettin' out now, Four Ace."

The girl uttered a choked scream. Aurelian possessed himself of Dineen's other hand. "Comin'?"

Dineen came.

"Now, by Gawd!" said he when he stood on the ground. "You can't run this, O'Riley. I'll kill you. You know it."

"We'll discuss that later. Now—" Aurelian smiled reassuringly at the girl. "Mrs. Gordon, this man and me,

we've got a li'l business matter. I'm sorry to hold up the trip, but it's real important. I'll be back in a minute. I—"

"I don't believe it," insisted the girl sharply. "You're going to do something to this man. You— Oh, soldiers! They'll see that no harm is done to you, Mr. Dineen."

Dineen's face brightened considerably, but so did Aurelian's, as a cavalry detachment of twenty-five enlisted men, eight mules and two packers, a lieutenant in the lead, rode down into the draw from the direction taken by the freighter.

"Lieutenant Saunders and some of the Seventh," Aurelian observed chattily. "A good outfit."

"You'll think so," Dineen declared with venom. "I guess they'll show you bandits where to head in."

Aurelian nodded composedly. "Maybe so. But don't go reaching for your pocket piece on the strength of it."

"I don't need to now," Dineen was triumphant.

The lieutenant flung up a hand and uttered a hoarse "H-rumph!"

The command halted with a jingle. Dineen raised his voice. "These two road agents are holding up the lady and me, Lieutenant."

Dusty Lieutenant Saunders peered at him dispassionately from beneath the brim of his black felt hat. He looked at the girl with lively appreciation. His eyes veered to Aurelian.

"Good morning, Aurelian," said he. "When did you begin distressing travelers on the broad highway?"

"It's a short story, Lieutenant. I'd like to talk to you privately."

"Do you know this man—these men, Lieutenant?" queried the girl in surprise.

"Very well," replied the lieutenant, promptly saluting youth and beauty. "We have hunted together many times. Aurelian and George O'Riley are, I hope, two of my best friends."

"But Mr.—Mr. O'Riley dragged this gentleman out of the buckboard—violently."

"I'm sure, Madam, if he dragged this gentleman from the buckboard—violently—that this gentleman stood in need of dragging—violently."

Mrs. Gordon knitted curving brows. It was obvious she was not satisfied. "But—"

"I claim your protection, Lieutenant," cut in Dineen. "I demand that you arrest these two men so that we may proceed to—to our—uh—destination."

"Mr. Dineen is escorting me to my brother's ranch," the girl explained hurriedly. "For some reason my brother Sam Sheardown—he owns the Lazy S ranch, you know—was unable to meet me, and Mr. Dineen very kindly offered to take his place."

Dineen muttered under his breath, for the stare bestowed upon him by the officer was anything but favorable.

"So you're Four Ace Dineen, are you? I've heard of you and your—uh—business methods." He dismounted lithely and faced the girl with his hat off. "Madam," said he, "on my honor as an officer, this man Dineen is no fit companion for you. I am unable, in words suitable for your ears, to express my opinion of Dineen. When the man leaves us, Mr. O'Riley will give you an explanation. You may be certain that whatever he says will be the truth. Personally, I will be most happy to offer you the protection of my command and escort you to—wherever you may wish to go. Again let me assure you that a man or woman can have no better friends than Mr. O'Riley and his brother."

"I see I don't need to talk with you privately, Lieutenant," Aurelian said softly. "Going, Dineen? Not in the buckboard. No."

Dineen halted with one foot on the step. "Oh, I guess so. It's my buckboard, hired from Bill Strong."

"I'd rather not have any trouble," pointed out Aurelian, "but you're going to leave the buckboard here, and you're going to walk around the point yonder with me, and after that it's your own business what you do."

"I ain't going," declared Dineen, wheeling back to face Aurelian. "You're witness, Lieutenant. This man brought it on himself."

But once again Aurelian anticipated the gambler's motion. One hand pinioned the Dineen wrist. The other snatched the Dineen derringer from the vest pocket and flung it into a mesquite clump. The gambler writhed and kicked with all his strength at Aurelian's kneecap. Aurelian lifted a swift foot and barked Dineen's shin with heel and spur. Mrs. Gordon uttered a slight scream. The lieutenant hastened forward to reassure her.

"I'll be back directly, Lieutenant," said Aurelian. "After you, Four Ace."

CHAPTER TWO

THE ELECTION

I

THE girl listened dry-eyed. When Aurelian finished speaking, she was silent for a space. Then, "If I'd been here it might not have happened."

"Why, no, Miss, you couldn't have prevented it. Those things happen in this country."

She regarded him with set face and glistening eyes. "My brother! My only brother!" she whispered tensely. "He never would consent to my coming out here even after Reginald was—was drowned. He said it was no place for a woman. I—I always wanted to come. I wrote him after my return from Europe I was coming out for a visit whether he wanted me or not. I ha-hadn't seen him for seh-seven yu-years. Nun-not since my marriage."

She dropped her head, burying her face in her gloved hands. Aurelian looked at her compassionately. She seemed so young to be in this terrible trouble. So young. Yet she had been married seven years ago. She must be twenty-five at least. His own age, lacking a year.

They were behind the point of the draw. She was sitting on his coat which he had spread in the shade of a spreading mesquite. The voices of the soldiers, blurred by distance, came faintly to his ears. A pack mule brayed. One of them evidently had lain down. The packers were talking to it in their own fashion, and, judging by the cracks, thrashing it upright. A pale *niña-de-tierra* crawled out from a crack between two lumps of adobe, spraddle-legged across the bare ground and vanished beneath a clump of sage. A tarantula hawk, the dragon-fly of the

Southwest, wings flashing, red-and-black body brilliant in the sunshine, flew in darting zigzag lines of flight over the brush, seeking its prey. Aurelian perceived and noted these things as a man will mark trivial details in moments of stress and tension.

The girl raised her head. Her eyes sparkled with the tears she was endeavoring to restrain. Aurelian saw, before she clasped her hands in her lap, that the palms of her gray kid gloves were wet. "I won't gu-give way," she said wanly. "Bu-but I'm afraid I'm not very bub-brave."

"You're doing fine, Miss," said Aurelian admiringly. "It ain't—" he floundered.

She looked over his head northwestward where the truncated cone of dark Salinas Peak showed above a dip in the yellow bank of the draw. The day was crystal clear and the sky was the bright and heartsome blue unknown in northern lands. The contrast between the beauty of the surroundings and the tale of sordid and sudden death she had listened to was appalling.

She shuddered in a tremor of repulsion. "The man—the murderer—wha-what was done to him?"

"He got away," was Aurelian's blunt reply.

She leaned forward, her eyes narrowed under the short brim of her red hat. "Do you mean to tell me that one man can—muh-murder another without an effort being made to find and punish the murderer?"

"He got away," Aurelian repeated patiently. "But don't think we didn't go after him. We rode the San Andreas from Mocking Bird Gap to San Nicolas Spring. On this side the Sands we searched the Golondrina and Three Rivers country and combed the Phillips Hills, and traveled as far north as Fort Stanton and east to the Pecos. We had no luck. It's a big scope of country, this part of New Mexico," he added in extenuation.

"Who was the man—the murderer?"

"A half-breed named White Mountain Pete."

"Where is Sam bur-buried?"

"We don't know."

"Don't know!"

"The body disappeared. It was never found."

A light of hope dawned in the dark eyes. "Then—then perhaps Sam's still alive."

"No chance," declared Aurelian, believing, with all good surgeons, that a fallacious hope should be eliminated at once. "It happened last June. This is November."

"I was taken ill with Roman fever two days after reaching Rome, and before I had time to forward my new address to my Paris bankers. It was at least four months before I began to take renewed interest in life at Anzio on the coast. I wrote my bankers then, and they told me that, not having heard from me for such a length of time, they had returned all mail to the senders. Oh-h! those Frenchmen are so stupid! But I wrote Sam. My letters—"

"I expect those were the ones ol' postmaster said came for Sam off and on the last two months. There wasn't any return address on any of 'em, so he sent 'em to the dead-letter office."

She dropped her head on her hands. "And all the time I thought Sam was too busy to write. Oh, it's horrible! My brother murdered! His body gone! And I never knew! And I never knew!"

She began to sob pitifully.

Aurelian, a hardy soul and tough as rawhide, did not quite know how to set about offering comfort to a lovely lady in distress. But he did the best he could. He stretched forth an arm and awkwardly patted her shoulder. "Times will maybe get better," said Aurelian.

"That won't bring mum-my bub-brother back! Oh, it's —it's horrible!"

From her sleeve she drew a scrap of what a woman

would have recognized as real lace and sheerest linen and pressed it to her eyes with a childish gesture of despair that drew Aurelian's heartstrings tight. He knew nothing of chivalry and deeds of high emprise as practiced by the men in armor. But in his own way he knew the call had come. "I found me a job," decided Aurelian O'Riley.

Her next words proved it. "What shall I do?"

"Are you Sam's only living relative?"

She nodded.

"Then you can stay at Sam's ranch," Aurelian declared heartily, despite the realization that the job had automatically assumed gigantic proportions. "You're the heir, so the Lazy S, being free and unencumbered," he continued, fully aware that if a person must lie, it is well to do so whole-heartedly, "is your ranch now. Don't you worry any about that part of it. I expect you'd better keep on Sam's three boys. They're good and reliable—real people. They know their job, and they'll look after you. If you don't mind me giving you a li'l advice, Mis' Gordon—" he hesitated.

"Please do. I'll need all you care to give me."

"Then when you meet the boys, I'd tell Minnesota Thompson he's foreman. Sam was his own manager and foreman, but—but—now there'll have to be a head, and Minnesota is the oldest of the three and knows the cow business from the Gulf to Colorado. He'll do to take along, every time. So will Tom and Dick, but they ain't had quite as much experience workin' cattle."

"Shall—shall we go out there to-day?"

"Well, I wouldn't to-day exactly. I expect you wouldn't care about spending any more time in Rosebud."

She shook her head. "I'd rather not."

Aurelian was glad of this. He was anticipating a certain amount of liveliness in Rosebud, and he wished the lady elsewhere. "I'll take you to Mis' Jackson's. Bill Jack-

son owns the John Cross. The house is only a mile north. Mis' Jackson will be glad to have you."

"But I can't intrude this way. An utter stranger—your friends—"

"You don't know this country, ma'am. Friends are friends. They'll be tickled to have you. You'll see."

II

"Poor young lady," said Lieutenant Saunders, when the John Cross lay over the hill behind them, and the wheels of the buckboard in which rode Aurelian and George, their horses rope-led behind them, were dusting his stirrup hood. "Poor young lady! What a frightful experience. Was she serious in saying she intended living at the Lazy S?"

"Why not?" Aurelian cocked an eyebrow.

"Then it must have been a false rumor, what I heard about Dineen's taking the Sheardown ranch on a mortgage."

"Oh, that was true enough. He did."

"Then how—"

"The business will be fixed up."

"But—"

"I reckon Dineen will listen to reason."

"Don't tell me anything further. I can guess the rest. You're a great man, Aurelian. But I'd watch my cinches, if I were you. Dineen is a hard case."

"I heard so."

The lieutenant laughed grimly. "There are times when I wish I was a civilian. I'd like to go with you."

"Shucks, I ain't said a word about going anywhere. George and me, we're going to town to vote. Ain't we, George?"

"Reely's going to make it an honest vote for once, Lieutenant," said George.

"What—in Rosebud?"

"That's his notion."

"I said he was a great man. You're another, George."

"I ain't carin' to be famous. But you know Reely. He sort of persuaded me."

"A pleasant time was had by all," chuckled the lieutenant. "You know, I believe in direct action myself, but a soldier is not a free agent. And since that Lincoln County business, orders are stricter than ever. We'll bivouac here on the creek, and the men will stay in camp to-night. So long, boys; take care of yourselves."

"Yes, it's a dog's life the long knives lead," grinned George as they splashed through the creek. "The swaddies will stay in camp with the sergeant keeping tabs. But will the lieutenant stay in camp? It's only two miles to Jackson's."

But his brother did not rise to that hook. Instead, "Bill Strong will be surprised to get his buckboard back so soon," said Aurelian.

III

"If you boys are wanting to vote, the polls are closed." Thus Sheriff Cahoon from the steps of the store that served as a polling place.

Aurelian looked up at the sun. "It ain't six o'clock yet," he said mildly.

"It's after five," explained the sheriff smoothly, and winked at Cal Collins, Charley Quay and Ruff Lanigan, the resident managers of the three big cow outfits, who, together with the men in office, practically ran the political division known as Rosebud County. "It's a new law, boys, this closing at five business."

Aurelian gravely raised his hat. "Regards to Sheriff Cahoon's new law. I see the store's open. There ain't any objection to my doin' a li'l tradin', is there?"

"Help yourself." Cahoon and his satellites made way.

Aurelian and George entered. They heard a faint snigger behind them on the steps. George looked at Aurelian. But Aurelian's expression was bland as butter. He hummed a sprightly tune. George followed his brother to the middle of the store where two men, election officials, one long and fat, the other his antithesis, sat beside a ballot box. The pair eyed the newcomers with disfavor.

"How's this, Fat?" said Aurelian. "Where are the other two election judges and the other clerk."

"Takin' a day off. What of it?"

"A day off? Election day?"

"That's what I said."

"I heard you. Anyhow, we'll vote, George and I."

"The polls are closed," said the fat judge in a squeaky voice, oddly at variance with his huge frame.

"The box looks kind of open-faced," objected Aurelian, in the same mild tone he had employed with the sheriff.

"The box is closed," the thin man declared in a base rumble.

"But it ain't six o'clock yet, Sim."

"Can't help it. Fat said the polls were closed, and I say so too. We're runnin' this election."

The storekeeper, one Sugar Roebuck, stared hard at Aurelian. He was not in sympathy with those who sat in state. But he knew which side his bread was buttered. Still, if any one else cared to—but apparently no one cared to. Roebuck turned back to the tobacco cutter. A customer who had been sampling the crackers and had paused in his occupation when the election officials gave their ultimatum, began again to dig into the barrel. Huh! he'd always heard Reely and George O'Riley couldn't be bluffed, and here they were taking water like sheep. Phut! He champed a cracker with contempt.

"Then there ain't a chance for us to vote," Aurelian nagged helplessly.

"Not a chance."

"If we can't vote, we can't," Aurelian surrendered and turned away. "You're busy, Sugar, and I want some tobacco. I'll just help myself."

He raised a counter flap and stepped behind it.

"The tobacco's over here on this side, Reely. You—" began Sugar.

But Aurelian had not even faced the shelves. He disappeared under the counter only to reappear like a jack-in-the-box, Sugar's cocked and sawed-off Greener in his hands.

He leaned across the counter and stared fixedly into the horrified eyes of the election officials. The ugly twin muzzles of the Greener were also staring them out of countenance. The cracker-eating customer lost all sense of taste and flew through the front door like a demented duck. Sugar Roebuck oozed backward and slithered across the nearest window sill with the speed of a Jersey eel.

"Just sit still, boys," Aurelian said softly. "Are you sure the polls are closed?"

"Pup-point that gun the other way!" squeaked the fat man.

"I understand Sugar keeps buckshot in both barrels and the pull is easy as an old boot, Fat. I ain't going to ask you again if the polls are closed."

"Fat, be reasonable!" urged the voice of the unseen storekeeper. "All my dynamite and a gross of detonators are right behind you fellers, and some of that buckshot is sure to miss you and bust hell plumb loose."

This pleasant news completely dampened Fat's powers of speech. He could only goggle and gulp and sit still. It was lean Sim who did the honors. "You can vote any time you like," Sim pronounced handsomely—in a voice that shook.

"No hurry," said Aurelian. "It's a fine day. Li'l warm, maybe. I think the sheriff and his friends are looking

in the door. If they come in, so long Fat and Sim."

"It's only the sheriff, Reely," George said with a grin. "The friends and everybody else are across the street behind Sugar's wagon-yard fence."

"For Gawd's sake, Sheriff, stay out!" implored Sim.

"G' on in, Sheriff!" Cal Collins urged loudly through the fence. "Don't let Reely bluff you!"

"Damn you, Cal, shut up!" yelped Sim. "Reely's got his finger right on the triggers!"

"This is your job, Sheriff," prodded Ruff Lanigan, a sardonic soul with a sense of humor, by far the cleverest of the whole crooked bunch, and not given to underestimating any opponent.

"Sheriff, I don't know that I want you even sticking your head in the door," said Aurelian. "Kind of stand back, if I were you."

"Reely, you can't do this sort of thing," the sheriff said with astonishing equableness, from a position well away from the door. "It's illegal."

"You're getting fussy all of a sudden, Sheriff. I suppose that's another one of your new laws." Aurelian grinned at the two unhappy election officials.

"A vote cast in this way is illegal, Reely."

"Really, really! you don't say."

"A vote cast under a threat is illegal. It won't be counted. That's what I mean."

"I ain't making any threats," insisted Aurelian. "I'm just standing here, me and Sugar's shotgun. Of course I ain't responsible if Fat and Sim are nervous about firearms. And about our votes not being counted, lemme tell you that every vote in that box that's in there before six o'clock will be counted!"

"They won't!" bawled the sheriff, his temper beginning to fray at the edges. "I'll see to that!"

"You're mistaken. These two lads will begin the count at six o'clock. I'll see to that."

"You're keepin' the voters out."

"No, I ain't. Anybody wantin' to vote come in and vote, one at a time, line forms on the right of the door, no crowdin', please."

"Here's a lot of fellers want to vote. Go right in, boys."

"We all voted before noon," declared the voice of a Rosebud citizen. "What's the matter in there?"

The matter was explained. There was an immediate scurry to join the multitude behind the wagon-yard fence.

Aurelian laughed. "I expect all the votes have been cast but ours, Sheriff. Unless some of your constituents feel like votin' twice. We'll look out for that. Sim's handwriting in the poll books is almost as plain as print. There'll be no last-minute rush of repeaters this election, like there was last time you were elected."

"Reely, I'll arrest you!"

"Hah-hah. If you knew how funny you look, Sheriff, standing off there in the street squalling in at me, you'd sit down and take it easy. I'll bet even Charley Quay is laughing at you, fellah. You don't know the first duties of a sheriff, and I think it's time we had a new one. You're a helluva sheriff. If I'm doing anything illegal, prance right in and prevent me and damn the consequences. Damn Fat and Sim, I mean. Why, Sheriff, I'm surprised at you. Shamey, shamey; where's your sporting blood?"

"O'Riley," quavered Sim with honest heat, "I believe you're a murderer at heart."

"That, from you, is a compliment. George, did you want to vote?"

George solemnly marked and deposited his ballot in the box. "I'll spell you with the gun while you vote, Reely."

"I'll manage, George. I can use a pencil one-handed, and I don't think Fat and Sim will move about any."

If Fat and Sim had perspired before, they sweated drops of agony as Aurelian, carelessly handling the cocked

Greener, exercised his rights as an American citizen.

"Sun's almost down," said Aurelian kindly, as he backed to his place behind the counter. "You'll be counting those votes in a li'l while, then we can all be happy,—except the sheriff. Listen."

"Sheriff, I wouldn't let anybody bluff me this way," they heard Cal Collins state with vehemence.

"But he'll kill Fat and Sim and blow Sugar's store to hell," protested the sheriff.

"To say nothing of blowing you to hell with the store," Ruff Lanigan suggested sarcastically.

"Why don't you go in yourself?" demanded Cahoon.

"Me, I'm not the sheriff. What are you for, anyway?" rejoined Lanigan. "When it comes to electing a new sheriff, I dunno that I ain't beginning to agree with Reely."

This was pretty plain talk. The whole town heard it. But Ruff Lanigan was—Ruff Lanigan. He was a better man than the sheriff. The sheriff knew it, and Ruff knew that he knew it.

"He's doing the best he can under the circumstances." Charley Quay hastened to oil the troubled waters. "Reely's fool enough to do exactly what he says. You've got to think of Sugar's store and—uh—Fat and Sim."

Ruff laughed. "I'm thinking of the sheriff. These things stick."

The sheriff immediately started for the door, but a stocky man, the owner of the Silver Saloon, no less, grabbed him by the gunbelt and bore him back. "You ain't gonna get either Sim or Fat killed, Sheriff. Fat owes me a bar bill of forty dollars, and Sim is into me for a jug of Jordan. If you're gonna bust in there and make bad debts out of those two boys, you can pay me the total first."

"Leggo me!" cried the sheriff furiously.

But the stocky saloon keeper only clung the tighter and reiterated his views on prompt settlements. The two staged a pretty struggle, while the edified crowd laughed.

"At it again." It was a new voice speaking, that of Corny Burgoyne, the first deputy. "What are they doing to you, Sheriff?" continued the first deputy.

"Corny!" panted the sheriff, striving to get a strangle hold on his adversary. "Go in there and arrest O'Riley. He's holding up the voting with a shotgun."

"Yeah? Reely O'Riley, huh? With a shotgun? To say nothin' of how much dynamite? And you want me to arrest him? Why me?" There was a running thread of amusement in the first deputy's tone that made Aurelian smile.

"Don't you see—" began the sheriff, but his elbow slipped and by mere chance struck his hamperer under the ear and knocked him cold.

"That's nice," observed Burgoyne. "Now you can do the arresting."

But the sudden impulse that had caused the sheriff to start toward the store had burned out during the wrestling match. "Burgoyne, I order you to go in there and arrest O'Riley."

"You want me to go where you're afraid to go yourself. Is that it?"

A deep and sudden silence brooded over the multitude.

"Burgoyne!" The sheriff's voice was harsh.

"Corny can come in and arrest me if he wants to." Thus Aurelian, uplifting his voice. "I'd like him in here, anyway, to keep cases when Fat and Sim begin to count."

Burgoyne laughed and strolled into the store. Once inside, and viewing the wretched election officials under the Greener's muzzle, he laughed again. "Reely," he observed cheerfully, "you got a bear by the tail. You've got to let go sometime, and then—"

"Think so?" Aurelian pulled a folded newspaper from his pocket and tossed it to the first deputy. "First column, second page. Read it."

Burgoyne obeyed. When he came to the middle of the

first column he glanced at Aurelian. "Reely, you joker, this will be a blow. Jawn will never forgive you."

"Ain't it the truth?" Aurelian stuffed the paper back into his pocket. "Want to arrest me, Corny?"

"Not under the circumstances. Too—uh—complicated." He seated himself on a counter beside the ballot box, and looked through the open doorway over the heads of the staring crowd. "Sundown."

"Might call Sugar, George," said Aurelian. "We'll be needing a lamp soon."

For a man who had been concealing himself behind the wagon-yard fence for the last half hour Sugar Roebuck entered the store and set about the business of lighting the lamps with remarkable *sang-froid.*

CHAPTER THREE

THE LA LUZ COUNTY SHERIFF

I

"ONE for Maxwell—one for Cahoon, one for Maxwell—one for Cahoon—one for Cahoon—one for Cahoon—" droned the voice of Fat. George O'Riley verified each vote as Fat called it, and Corny Burgoyne watched Slim's pencil as it made the tally.

It was long after six o'clock when the count for Rosebud was complete. Sim announced smugly, "Two hundred and six for Sheriff John Cahoon. Two hundred and eight for Maxwell. But lemme tell you, there's Green Rock, Center and Sandstorm to be heard from yet. Besides—"

"Aw, shut up!" Aurelian invited wearily. "They're all in the southern part of the county. They'll vote for Maxwell, and you know it. The sheriff and his bunch were depending on Rosebud to elect him, and now we know what Rosebud can do when the vote's honest. Sheriff, want to come in now?"

Entered then the sheriff, Cal Collins, Charley Quay, Ruff Lanigan and some other friends in his train, the townspeople and a few punchers from the scattered southern ranches trailing. Ten feet from Aurelian, the sheriff, who had been walking more and more slowly—a detail lost on no one—the nearer he came to his objective, halted. "Aurelian," he pronounced fatefully, "you might as well put down that gun. I have posted men at every door and window."

"You would do that," drawled Aurelian. "And here's the gun. It ain't loaded, anyway."

"Huh?" burst in an agonized squawk from the still sweating Fat.

"It was lying open on the shelf here with the shells beside it. So I didn't bother to load. Just snapped it shut. Seemed to work all right."

The sheriff promptly drew his six-shooter. "O'Riley! you're under arrest. If you make a crooked move, I'll down you."

"I expect you're a judge of crooked moves," said Aurelian, his hands locked comfortably behind his head. "But before you do anything rash, such as corralling me in jail, I'd let my eagle eye rove along down the first column, second page of the Santa Fe *New Mexican* I laid there alongside the Greener."

"Read nothin'. Come out from behind that counter."

It was then that the tall figure of the sheriff of La Luz County pushed between Charley Quay and Ruff Lanigan and eased himself down on the counter and blocked the opening in the counter with outstretched leg.

"Get out of the way, McGee!" snarled Cahoon. "Your star don't travel a foot in Rosebud County."

"Sure, sure," McGee agreed amiably, "but before you arrest anybody you read this where my thumb is."

He had picked up the *New Mexican* and was holding it out to Cahoon. The latter hesitated, then took the paper reluctantly.

He moved forward beneath the lamp, hung his revolver by the trigger guard on a little finger, and began to read, quickly at first, then more and more slowly. Suddenly he flung the paper down and whirled the revolver butt into a ready palm. "It's a fake. I don't believe it!"

Sheriff McGee cupped an ear with his forefinger. "I didn't catch your remark. I say it's true."

"I ain't doubtin' your word, Mooney," the Rosebud sheriff backed water slowly. "But newspapers don't always tell the truth."

"The *New Mexican* does. That notice is a plain notice put out by the surveyor-general's office in Santa Fé and says that the contract surveyor, when he ran the line between La Luz and Rosebud, made a mistake of half a degree too much in the north angle along the east and west line of the jog specified by the legislature in order to include the town of Rosebud in the county."

"But this store's in Rosebud," protested Cahoon. "Why didn't they run the line farther north in the first place, so as to include it?"

"This store wasn't built when the county was platted. The line as originally run on the plot did include all the town," patiently explained Sheriff McGee. "But the surveyor with the half-degree mistake included part of La Luz, and gave Rosebud more than she was entitled to. Naturally, as soon as the surveyor-general's office got around to checking him—they're rushed with work these last two years—they found the mistake."

"Why didn't they let it ride?"

"Take an act of legislature to do that, and Weston, our county representative, said he'd speechify from hell to breakfast before he'd see La Luz cheated out of her rights."

"But Weston is our representative too!"

"Yeah, and I noticed the other party in both counties didn't run any one against him this trip, so he's elected again. Popular man, Weston."

"Maybe he won't be so popular next election."

"Oh, I guess this won't hurt him any. Folks know damwell he'd go to the mat for Rosebud against La Luz any time it's necessary. He's square forty ways, and he can whirl the dictionary like a cowman does a rope. Oh, we all know Gabby Weston, and the legislature knows him better. They weren't going to do anything to get *him* started. So the mistake is rectified, and one half of Sugar Roebuck's store is in Rosebud and one half is in La Luz.

Your county taxes are going to be a problem to you, Sugar. You'll have to keep two sets of books."

Sugar uttered a heartfelt exclamation. "Then that was what the surveyor was doing here last month. He set up his telescope jigger out in the street and his rodman stood out back. He must have sighted plumb through the store. He didn't say anything, and I didn't."

McGee nodded. "He wasn't confessin' any mistake to you or anybody else around here. I expect the surveyor-general had already talked to him plenty. But everything's all right now."

" 'And La Luz has got her own again,' " paraphrased Aurelian.

"Then this election's illegal," declared Cahoon, with an ugly look at the speaker. "The votes won't count, any of 'em."

"Why not?" inquired Aurelian. "This is the most northerly house in Rosebud. There ain't a single place to the north inside the false or true line, except the corrals where Tamplin keeps his freight mules and you aren't figurin' on votin' them. That would be too rough, even for Rosebud."

"I tell you it's illegal," persisted the sheriff. "There'll be a new vote. I'll fix that, if I have to go to Santa Fé myself."

Aurelian shook his head. "I don't think you'll go to Santa Fé—except maybe to jail sometime. You see, Sheriff, the votes were all cast in Rosebud County, because the ballot box is on the south side of the store, the only open space in the whole store where the election officials have room to sit—just where I figured it would be," he added complacently.

Sheriff Cahoon stared poisonously at Aurelian. "You admit you planned this—this deal—you and George and Mooney McGee?"

"George and Mooney had nothing to do with it,"

smirked Aurelian. "I did it with my li'l shotgun."

"You're all in it together, you and George and McGee, and I'll bet Sugar knew that gun wasn't loaded all the time, and didn't open his mouth on purpose."

"I opened my mouth plenty!" bawled the maligned Sugar indignantly over the heads of the crowd. "Do you think I'd have bulged over the window and got splinters in both knees and every hand I own if I hadn't thought it was loaded?"

The sheriff turned back angrily to Aurelian. "Your game won't do you any good, O'Riley. Maybe I can't get the voting nullified,—"

"I expect you're mighty certain Shotgun Maxwell was elected, or you wouldn't make all this fuss," inserted Aurelian. "You know it's a real good thing I happened in to-day."

"Damn you, shut up! Maybe I can't get the vote squashed. But I can and will arrest you for coercion with firearms. Throw up your hands!"

"You're repeatin' yourself, Sheriff," smiled Aurelian, leaning easily on his elbows and wagging an admonitory head. "You told me to put 'em up before, and I did, and then I put 'em down and you never noticed. I can't take arm exercise all day just to make you happy. I'm all wore out right now, what with the excitement and one thing and another—includin' yourself, Sheriff."

The sheriff, taking care to keep his gun trained on Aurelian, produced a jingling pair of twisters and took a step toward the opening in the counter. "You mind putting your leg down, Mooney?"

"That depends," said McGee, without moving. "If you're coming over into *my* county as a friend, that's one thing, but if you're comin' over wavin' a pistol and rattlin' the bracelets, and makin' threats to arrest folks, that's something else, and I guess I'll stay where I am."

The veins in Sheriff Cahoon's red neck swelled dan-

gerously. A curt laugh from Ruff Lanigan and emphatic chuckles from the appreciative crowd did not soothe his stormy feelings. He fought hard for self-control.

"McGee, you got me. I can't make an arrest in your county, but you can. I'm askin' you friendly to arrest O'Riley and turn him over to me on the charge of coercion with a deadly weapon."

"I didn't see him commit any crime," denied McGee. "In order to make an arrest without a warrant, I have to see an illegal act being committed.'

"I'll swear out a warrant," fumed the sheriff.

"In that case," pointed out McGee, *"I'll* have to catch up Reely for you. He might not be around by then."

"That's true, I might not," said Aurelian. "But then again I might. It would be an amusin' trial, sort of. You know Weston. He's a good lawyer, and I'll sure have him. Can't you just hear him spreading himself on how Aurelian O'Riley, over in La Luz County, held up the election officials over in Rosebud with an empty shotgun, and how Sheriff Cahoon stayed out in the street and hollered his head off—but didn't come in where the fire was. He'll make you famous, Weston will. Your name will go ringin' down the corridor of time like forty engine bells, and the memory of that trial will stick in folks' minds and to you like burrs in a cow's tail. Tell you what, Sheriff, I won't put you to a mite of trouble about it. Here I come." So saying, Aurelian vaulted the counter and leaned against a show case on the Rosebud side. "Now you arrest me, Sheriff, and give the territory a good laugh."

A moment the nonplussed sheriff stared, then he turned on an abrupt heel, and pushed his way out through the crowd.

In order to give the sheriff an opportunity to change his mind, Aurelian remained where he was. After a brief interval, the sheriff not reappearing, Aurelian murmured

to George that he thought he would hunt up Dineen, and went out by the back door. But he did not find Dineen that evening.

II

Hank Slipe, the notary, was a mean and furtive bachelor with the pointed features of a pack rat. He shaved regularly, cut his own hair and prided himself on not wearing socks. His one extravagance was his boots, which were specially made in Denver—beautiful boots, black, knee-high, cowboy style and last, the legs worked in arabesques and scrolls with red thread. Oddly enough, Sockless Hank was never known to bestride a horse. He always drove, mules for choice.

On the evening of Election Day the notary was sitting in his kitchen, a smoky lamp on the table before him, devouring corned beef and salt biscuit and drinking hot water. Coffee cost money, but water cost nothing save the labor of packing it from the watering trough appertaining to the nearest house. Sockless Hank was not a popular person. He met people in the course of business —he lent money on mortgage, and on notes too, if the security was good. He had desk room where he transacted business in the Golden Rule Store, and no one was ever known to call at his residence, a two-room adobe with a leaky roof, between which and the nearest house mentioned above lay a stretch of ground more than a hundred yards long occupied by two corrals and the windmill pumping for the trough-pipe that supplied him with water. It may be said that his domicile was isolated, which precisely suited the purpose of the unexpected visitor who entered silently as Sockless Hank was sopping his plate, and thrust a pistol muzzle into the back of his neck.

The gravy-soaked biscuit in Hank's fingers stopped

dead in the center of the plate. Sockless Hank sat still as still. His heart was chillier than the metal ring that caressed his vertebræ.

An arm reached over his shoulder. A hand lowered the untrimmed wick of the smoking lamp. A black hand. Black as the chimney of the lamp it touched. The wrist and arm were garbed in an odd-looking sleeve covered with coarse black hair. A tremor shook the notary's lean frame. He did not like Negroes. He feared this one with the queer sleeve. Fingers prodded and patted his shrinking frame until they found his gun and removed it carefully.

"Suh," whispered a somewhat muffled voice in his left ear, "talk low like me when you anseh—got any writin' material heah?"

"Who—what?" huskily stammered Sockless Hank.

"A papeh and a pen *and* ink? You got 'em?"

"Ye-yes."

"Git 'em."

"They—they're over on the shelf yon-yonder. I—that gun—I—"

"Git 'em, Ah said. And that gun will go right with you."

It did go with him. It also came back with him. But when Sockless resumed his uneasy seat, it was suddenly removed, and the husky voice said, "Look at me, suh."

Sockless Hank turned an unnerved head and well-nigh passed out then and there. He collapsed sidewise in the chair, his hands clawing the air, and gibbered like a monkey. Because the object that confronted him was to all intents and purposes a black-and-white cow standing on its hind legs. There were the spreading horns, the blunt, broad head, the hairy hide, and for the last and happiest touch, it wore its tail tucked up in front through the buster's belt that encircled its middle.

The phenomenon plucked at the huddle that was Sock-

less Hank, jerked him into a sitting position and held him so.

"Suh," breathed the muffled Southern voice, "pick up that pen and write what Ah tell you."

The quaking aspen had nothing on Sockless Hank at the moment. The pen slipped from his numb fingers and rolled half across the table. Promptly the phenomenon dealt him a smart box on the ear. "Stop wigglin' thataway, or Ah'll whang you with mah hind hoof."

Sockless Hank made shift to grasp the pen more firmly. The gun muzzle resumed its first position. Somehow the cold ring of metal settled his stomach. His brain began to function. It must be a nightmare, after all. He had merely fallen asleep over his supper. Presently he would wake up.

Again the muffled Southern accents. "Write, 'I, Henry Slipe, notary public in the town of Rosebud'—Write, suh, write." The gun muzzle bored in heavily. Sockless Hank wrote. 'did conspire with Fo' Ace Dineen to fawge—F-O-R-G-E—fawge the mortgage money on the Lazy S, the ranch of Sam Sheardown,'—Got that? You ain't! Write it, or Ah'll blow you apa't!"

This was no nightmare. This was Nemesis. With a groan of pure agony that twisted his pack-rat features into a mask of tragedy, Slipe wrote what he had been told to write.

"Ah'll give you a li'l salve now. Write 'Fo' Ace held a gun at mah head and threatened mah life when Ah objected to committin' this crime.' You can write that part mighty easy, Ah see. Don't drop that pen. You ain't through yet. 'Fo' Ace also threatened to kill me if Ah eveh confessed anything about the deal.' Theah. Now you remembah, this won't be used against you unless it's necessary. *Unless necessary,* understand? That's all. Now sign it."

But in spite of the salve the actual affixing of his

signature to the incriminating paper was too much.

"I won't!" squalled Sockless Hank, suddenly ablaze with the rage of the cornered rat he resembled.

Two minutes later, sobbing with the aches and pains that were the immediate result of his contumacy, Sockless Hank signed his name to the confession. He also thought it well to accede to the suggestion of Nemesis that he seal the document with the notary's seal he always carried in his pocket.

"Now Ah'll gag yo' mouf and tie you up fo' the night, and—uh—remove yo' boots. Don't choke to death. Ah'll be needin' you lateh."

III

At the end of a profitable evening spent at his trade Four Ace Dineen let himself into his dark kitchen and shouted for his wife to remove his boots. But this well-trained partner of his joys and sorrows did not materialize.

"Damn her!" he cried in a pet, feeling for a match in his vest pocket. "I'll snatch her out of bed by the back hair!"

Intent on this pleasing resolution, he drew the match along the seat of his pants. Simultaneously with the flaring of the match a metallic object impinged upon the base of his skull and knocked him cold as a wedge.

He awoke to a cracking headache and a light that hurt his aching eyes. Also a gag filled his mouth, compelling him to breathe strongly through his nose, and he could move no part of his body except his eyes. These told him nothing. The light from the lamp was blinding at first.

Gradually, as eyesight and brain began to function normally, it was borne in upon him that he was sitting in a chair in front of his own kitchen stove, that he was

bound tightly to the chair, and that the reason he could not move his head to right or left was because it was strapped to a board wedged upright between his body and the back of the chair. Rage consumed him. Furiously he essayed to twist his body.

"No use, Four Ace," came a hoarse, obviously disguised whisper from behind him. "You're fast for the present. Pick up that pen. I'll slack the rope on your right hand and arm."

Four Ace slowly moved his cramped right arm. Suddenly he snatched at the gag in his mouth. Instantly his hand was jerked down level with the rung of the chair.

"The rope is still fastened to your wrist," pointed out the invisible whisperer. "The end passes around the chair rung and all I have to do is yank when convenient. Pick up that pen and write what I tell you. There's paper and ink."

The rope at his right wrist loosened and Four Ace complied. But on hearing the first words of the dictation, he dropped it like a live coal and made a grab for the lamp. Again his right wrist smacked the top rung of the chair with a force that hurt.

"I can't waste any time on you," observed the unseen. Dineen heard a match crackle into life. A moment later the burning match was held beneath the lobe of his right ear and remained so for a space of at least three seconds.

Dineen's gorge rose with the pain. He uttered a strangled gobble. The match was at once removed. "You gonna write what I say, or will I burn the other ear?"

IV

" 'I, Four Ace Dineen, for the sum of one dollar and other valuable considerations, do affirm and declare that the mortgage I hold on the ranch and cattle of Sam Sheardown, situate in Rosebud County, and the terri-

tory of New Mexico, is hereby satisfied. Therefore I relinquish and surrender to the estate of Sam Sheardown the said ranch and cattle.' " The whisper died. Then, "I see you've signed it Thomas Dineen. Better add after it, 'Known as Four Ace Dineen in the town and county of Rosebud.' That will do nicely. Now I'll tie that right hand good and tight. Ugh!"

Scrape. Thud! a heavy body struck the floor beside Dineen's chair. A pair of legs wearing beautiful boots, black, knee-high, cowboy style and last, the legs worked in arabesques and scrolls with red thread, shot into the lamplight full into Dineen's line of vision. He saw but a few inches of trousers above the boots, but he knew those boots. Indeed he did.

"Slipped, damn it!" grunted the voice, as the boots were whisked backward out of sight. "So long, Four Ace."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WAY OF THE WICKED

I

Between nine and ten next morning, Flo Dineen, the wife of Four Ace the gambler, returned to her spouse, and as she released him from his bonds with a butcher knife and cries of indignation, she explained her absence with a tale of a midnight message delivered by a Mexican she did not know, the purport of which had been that her mother was ill and desired her presence. Whereupon she had gone to her mother and found her mother exceedingly well. So it had been merely a very bad joke of some miscreant who wished to make her ride thirty miles for nothing. She was sorry, and—

But by this time she had entirely released her lord and master and was sorrier, for he, burning with the resentment that several hours enforced restraint in an exceedingly cramped position will naturally fan into flame, and strong in the husbandly sentiment that a wife should always be on hand when wanted, snatched the dead lamp from the table and hurled it at her head. But she had not been the wife of his bosom for two years for nothing. She dodged the missile with the agility of long practice, and the lamp smashed her cherished mantel clock to small flinders. Dineen dived for the woodbox, but before he closed his fingers on a convenient chunk his wife was out of the door, had crawled her saddle on the jump and was galloping back to her mother as fast as her horse could lay hoof to the ground.

Dineen stood in the doorway a moment, picking splinters from his fingers, and watching the dust cloud that marked his wife's departure. "Oh, well," he muttered,

"she'll come back. She always does." Then he hitched up his pants, tucked a six-shooter into his waistband and a derringer into his vest pocket and went elsewhere, for he had what he considered business that demanded his immediate attention.

He hurried to the Golden Rule store, entered, and strode past the few customers to the rear of the building, where in a cubby-hole of an office partitioned off from the store proper Sockless Hank conducted his affairs. Dineen entered upon the notary without ceremony. At his entrance Sockless Hank lifted a countenance woebegone and worried. Dineen, jumping to conclusions, misinterpreted the reason for the notary's distress. The gambler's fell and lowering face set like granite.

"You rat!" he began. "Do you think you can run a blazer on me and make it good?"

"Huh?" Astonishment vied with the grief in the features of Sockless Hank.

Four Ace, fingers in his vest pockets, leaned forward across the desk, "Did you think I didn't see your boots? And not know 'em when I see 'em?"

"Boots?" the notary repeated stupidly. "What boots?"

"Your boots!" Dineen ground out like a stone crusher. "There ain't another pair like 'em in town."

Sockless Hank wagged a bewildered head. "What are you talking about?"

"Playin' the innocent, hey?" The hiss of a poisonous reptile was no more unpleasant than the whisper of Four Ace Dineen. "Fork over what you got from me last night!"

Sockless Hank stared into the stubby twin muzzles of Dineen's derringer. It struck him that he was having considerably more to do with deadly weapons than was customary. People seemed to consider him a mark for threats of violence. But he possessed more courage in broad daylight than at night. The fact that he was in the

Golden Rule Store with the proprietor and customers within call likewise helped to bear up his chin.

He sat back in his chair, thumbs hooked in the armholes of his greasy vest. "Explain yourself."

"I'll explain myself with both barrels if you don't gimme that release!"

"Release! Wha—"

The door at Dineen's back flew open. In pushed Ruff Lanigan and Cal Collins. They surveyed the scene of impending bloodshed with amazement. "What are you doing to our notary?" demanded Ruff Lanigan.

Dineen did not remove his eyes from the notary. "A li'l private business," he mumbled uncomfortably.

"So of course you're conducting it in the Golden Rule Store where a li'l shooting would create no comment." Ruff's tone, while held carefully low, was rank with contempt. "Pah! I thought better of you, Dineen. Put away that gun."

Dineen obeyed with reluctance—but he obeyed.

"That's right, always the gentleman," observed Lanigan silkily.

"Don't try to ride me!" snarled Dineen. "I won't take everything from you."

"You'll take what I choose to give you, and that'll be plain talk right now. What do you mean by giving an assignment of all your interest in the Sheardown ranch to Mis' Gordon's attorney?"

Bang! Ruff Lanigan, shrewd fellow, had kept a hard eye on the gambler. He was in time to knock up the gambler's wrist so that the shot bored a harmless hole in the roof. Dineen, frothing with rage, struggled in Ruff's grasp. Cal Collins was assisting the notary, who had fallen right over backward at the shot.

"Damn it, Cal, don't be so careless!" Ruff Lanigan cried loudly for the benefit of those in the store. "Whynell don't you carry the hammer on an empty chamber so

when you drop a gun it can't go off! I swear, you mighty nigh drilled my ear. Get a-holt of yourself, Four Ace!" he added compellingly in the gambler's ear.

"I'll kill him!" wheezed Four Ace.

"Not now, anyway. I'll have your artillery, please; Cal, you take Hank's. We'll all go down to Hank's where we can set easy without being overheard. Yeah, you too, Hank. I'm curious to know why Four Ace wants to kill you so much."

II

"All set?" remarked Ruff, looking at the three men grouped with him around the notary's kitchen table. "Now about that release, Four Ace. The recorder's clerk told me this morning that Gabby Weston, Mis' Gordon's attorney, came to the office as soon as it opened and presented an unquestionably legal release of the Sheardown mortgage signed by you. *Hold him,* Cal!"

Ruff went to the assistance of Cal Collins. The notary sat very still. He lowered a hand and felt surreptitiously in a bootleg. What he found seemed to reassure him somewhat. But one could surmise that his happiness was not quite complete when he again placed his elbows on the table.

"Look here," said Ruff severely, when the gambler had been quieted, "I want to know why every time I mention that mortgage you try to massacre Sockless Hank? Has it anything to do with why you were holding him up in the Golden Rule Store?"

The gambler had ceased to struggle. "I'll be quiet for now." The two men loosed their hold a trifle. "Feel the back of my head, Ruff."

"Hm-m-m! You seem to have collected quite a bump."

"I got that when I went into my kitchen last night or this morning rather, at two o'clock. It knocked me out.

When I came to, I was sitting in a chair hog-tied and helpless. Look at my ear."

"Seems to be sort of raw at the bottom."

"Sort of! That's where I was burnt with a match until I agreed to write out and sign this release your're talking about."

"So you did give a release?" Ruff said softly, while Cal Collins swore not at all softly. "Not so loud, Cal. You sound like a bull. Where does Hank come in, Four Ace?"

"He was in it all the time. Toward the last he slipped on the floor, and his boots came into sight. I was tied so I couldn't turn my head, but I saw those red-embroidered boots. Hank's boots. There ain't another pair like 'em in town, and if you'll take your damn hands away I'll fix his clock for him."

"I can explain those boots!" The notary cried in sudden excitement. "I didn't know what you meant by my boots before, Dineen. But I see it all now. A feller held me up too last night, and he borrowed my boots. Yeah, borrowed, because he brought 'em back later. See, I've got 'em on now. But he must have been wearin' 'em when he held *you* up."

"You're lyin' lik'ell!" raved Dineen, struggling in the grip of Ruff Lanigan. "You were never held up! You—"

"Shut up, Dineen!" barked Lanigan. "Calm down, will you! That's better. We'll never get anywhere with you explodin' continual thisaway. Don't you see how your story simplifies the business, Four Ace? A release obtained under duress is void. All you have to do is swear to that in court. You're a jack-leg lawyer, Hank. Ain't I right?"

The notary nodded. But his sudden flare of excitement had burned out. Sorrow again bestrode him heavily. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he mumbled, "You're right, as far as you go. But—"

Ruff sighed, and tightened his grasp on the gambler's arm. "I suppose that 'but' is where you and *your* hold-up come in."

The notary gulped. Painfully, with many swallowings of his troublous Adam's apple, he detailed the story of the confession he had written and signed the night before.

Ruff looked up at the ceiling and whistled loud and long. "So it won't be used unless necessary, huh? Unless necessary. What an ace in the hole! Oh, pretty, pretty! Hank, were you tied up too, so that you couldn't see anything but a pair of boots?"

"He wasn't wearing my boots when he came to see me. He borrowed 'em from me, I told you. And I wasn't—uh—tied up. He—he held a gun in my ear all the time."

"Sensible of him. Is that all your story?"

"I ain't sure."

"You ain't sure! What—"

"I mean," Hank hastened to say, "that about a half hour after he left he came back and made me attest and seal some kind of document. I couldn't tell what it was. He kept the writing covered, but—but I expect it was Dineen's release, all right."

"I expect so too. Just how much did you see of this hold-up?"

"I saw all of him. He was a nigger."

"A nigger!"

"I saw—his hands, and they were black, but I didn't see his face. He was—uh—in disguise."

"In disguise, huh?"

"He was dressed up in a black-and-white cowskin, horns and tail complete, with a buster's belt around his belly, and talked like an African."

The disbelief on the faces of his listeners would have been patent to a denser mind than that of Sockless Hank's. He spread his hands. "Don't you believe me?"

"A black-and-white cowskin, wore a buster's belt, and talked like an African!" Ruff Lanigan burst into a roar of harsh laughter. "No, I don't believe you. I know you're lyin'."

"But I swear it's true. Didn't I tell you he took my boots?" Hank's voice was shrill with honest indignation.

"You've told us a whole lot, and you might as well try to tell us he was disguised as a bale of hay, wore a sunbonnet and talked like an Eskimo! Expect us to swallow a cock-and-bull tale like that? Man, you're a fool!"

"And we're two others to have any truck with him," rumbled Cal Collins. "I believe he's the boy got that release from Four Ace all right, and sold it to Weston. He's sold us out sure enough."

"I might believe he wrote that confession under compulsion," mused Ruff Lanigan. "Some fellers will do most anything with a gun in their necks, but that black-and-white cow talkin' like an African is what gets my time! Dineen, you got to fight that release. Confession be damned! There ain't no such animal."

"I tell you, Ruff," Hank squealed in anguish, "there is a confession! And if it ever gets into court, it'll put me and Dineen behind the bars!"

"Aw, hell, you're just sayin' that so you'll get paid for that release when the mortgage is lifted. You ain't been paid yet. I can see that. But we'll beat your li'l game, sport. If you think we're going to let go of the Lazy S after all the trouble we've had, you've got another guess."

"But he's got to be taught it don't pay to stack the cards against us," inserted Cal Collins grimly.

"You bet you! To do your lawful partners dirt, especially when we're the partners, was careless of you, Hank. We paid you to be crooked in our interest. Now you'll pay. Go get him, Dineen."

The gambler could have gone round the table, but he took the shorter way—straight across and caught squarely

through the shoulder the broad blade of the bowie knife Sockless Hank had plucked from a bootleg. The gambler struck the floor on his head. Instinctively both Ruff and Cal reached for their guns. But the notary, desperate with fear, buzzed the bowie at Cal and pinned the fleshy part of his right arm to the back of the chair. Ruff's gun was out and coming up, but the muzzle caught under the edge of the table. Before he could free it the panting notary shoved the table right over on top of him. Ruff went down in a tangle of furniture. With a jackrabbit leap Sockless Hank dived through a window.

"It's just as well," Ruff Lanigan pronounced philosophically as he crawled out from beneath the table. "I'd have enjoyed seeing Dineen beat him to a whisper, but if we'd dropped him, it would have made more or less talk."

"Damn the talk!" fumed Cal Collins, his lips twisted with pain as he strove to disengage with all gentleness the knife that held prisoner his arm. "Look what he did to my arm! I'll kill him quick as I see him!"

"You won't see him soon," returned Ruff, glancing through a window. "There he goes now in his buckboard, and maybe he ain't pouring leather into the mules. Lemme help you. I'll bet he expected some kind of a break to have had his team all hitched and ready."

"Ouch! Go easy! I ain't a beef! ———! ———!"

"It's your own fault, Cal," pointed out the unsympathetic Ruff. "You should have searched out that knife when you took away his gun."

"I'll go after him!" raved Cal. "He—"

"Be sensible! He won't stop this side of Old Mexico. Here, sit still. I'll have it out in two shakes. Aw, shut up! We ain't got any time to waste on a mess like Hank who won't bother us any more anyway. We got plenty work to do, Cal. Look at Four Ace, there. He won't be able to appear in court for ten days, maybe longer. Be with you in a minute, Four Ace, soon as I fix up Cal here. Just lie

quiet. You ain't bleedin' more than you should—considerin'. Now you're yowlin' to get hunk too, are you? You make me sick. Will you never learn not to try to kill a man when it ain't neccessary?"

III

"Everything all set about the Lazy S, Gabby?" asked Aurelian.

Gabby Weston regarded his visitor with a slight smile. He was a long-nosed individual, this county representative, with the wide mouth of the born orator, and was accustomed to mix more than a fair knowledge of the law with strong common sense. "Yes," said he, producing a box of Pittsburg stogies, extraordinarily dark in hue and most sinister in appearance; "The absence of a will is immaterial in the present case. I do not anticipate any further trouble. I made an appointment to-morrow for Mrs. Gordon to appear before the probate judge with proofs of her identity. A mere matter of form, but necessary. There'll be no difficulty. She has a lot of Sam's letters, besides other proofs, that she is the deceased's only living relative. After to-morrow she may take possession whenever she likes. The probate judge was inclined to delay matters—he owes Dineen money, I understand—and tried to tell me that as long as there was no *corpus delicti*, he intended to permit Mrs. Gordon to take tentative possession only, until the year required by law in such cases had elapsed. But I pointed out that as long as he had already stretched a point in accepting the blood on the buckboard as the actual body of the murdered man, which he had done, in order that Dineen might take possession at the end of four months instead of a year, I believed that he could without difficulty extend an equal courtesy to Mrs. Gordon. He saw the point."

"How was Sam fixed for money?"

"Seven hundred odd in the bank. She'll have that, of course. Not much, but it will help until spring sales come along."

"You don't think she's rich?" Aurelian queried, a slight pucker between his brows.

Weston shook his head. "I gathered that outside of this inheritance she has very little."

"She wears mighty fine clothes." Dubiously.

"Fine clothing doesn't necessarily mean wealth nowadays. Women of her class can wear anything and look like a million dollars in gold. But I certainly wish Sam had been rich for her sake. She deserves everything the world can give her, that lady. Have a stogy?"

Aurelian shuddered visibly. "No, thanks, I wouldn't care for any."

"George?"

"Not while I have a sense of taste," grunted George, tilting his chair back against the wall and tipping his hat over his eyes. "Why don't you smoke tobacco, Gabby?"

"Stunt my growth. Make me weak." The representative was six feet four in his socks, and more than once on a bet had lifted a barrel of flour into a wagon. He selected and lit one of the appalling cheroots. "I hear there was a slight disagreement down at Sockless Hank's this morning."

"Yeah?" Polite interest, but nothing stronger, on the part of Aurelian. George seemed to have fallen asleep. "Your Roman candle there throws sparks like a woodburner. Powder must be damp."

Weston inhaled a lungful with genuine enjoyment and exhaled luxuriously. "It seems that the eminent Sockless took issue with Four Ace Dineen and California Collins over a card debt, and assaulted both of them."

"The little devil! I didn't think he had it in him."

"The two debt collectors had his knife in them before the dust lifted. Then Sockless went away." He withdrew

the stogy from his mouth and reflectively eyed the sputtering end. "He'll be missed."

"Not if Four Ace or Cal sees him first."

"I question that he'll give them the opportunity. When I saw him careering down the El Paso road, it struck me that he had no intention of returning. By the way, I've had to use that confession of Hank's."

"Already?"

"Not ten minutes before you arrived, Counselor O'Keefe came to me with the announcement that his client, Four Ace Dineen, at the moment prostrate on a bed of pain, refused to relinquish the mortgage for which I had made demand, and was firm in the resolve to appear in court at the earliest possible moment and denounce as a dastardly—I think that was the word he used—forgery the piece of paper I had filed with the county clerk. I expressed my surprise at this intention of Dineen's and asked the counselor to glance over Hank's confession. O'Keefe's a vermiculate cuss, but he knows when he's licked. He confessed that he had been misinformed, promised to return the mortgage, and hoped that I would not be too hard on Dineen, who had suffered a good deal already. I told him frankly that if it became necessary I felt reasonably assured that I could pick a jury that would give Dineen ten years at least. He assured me that the necessity would not arise, and for his part he was glad of it. He hadn't enjoyed the prospect of fighting a woman and wouldn't have even considered taking the case if he hadn't needed the money. Some men will do anything for money. What's money? Nothing at all. By the way, Reely, you owe me ten dollars."

"I'll write you a check for nothing at all, and we'll call it square."

Weston laughed. "The drinks are on me. Have a stogy instead. What's the matter?"

"I was thinking."

"Odd attitude. Why bend double? What do you see on my rug besides dust?"

Aurelian pointed downward a lean forefinger. "I see a face," he whispered hoarsely, "the face on the barroom floor, the face of California Collins. Now I see other faces, those of Sockless Hank and Four Ace Dineen." He straightened abruptly and poked Weston in the vest with that lean forefinger. "Now I ask you as a friend what is the face of Cal Collins doing with those other two?"

Weston's long countenance was as solemn as a horse's. "How much?"

"We know it wasn't about a card debt, that knifing fuss, don't we? There was only one cause for it. Now why was Cal Collins of the Rafter Box mixed up in it? Why? Unless—"

Weston nodded gravely. "True, the Rafter Box adjoins the Lazy S on the north, and so does the Flying H, Ruff Lanigan's outfit of sons-of-guns. But I haven't heard of any trouble there."

"Never a bit. But—Cal and Ruff and Charley Quay are three slippery junipers."

"If they're behind Dineen in this mortgage business—" Gabby Weston did not take the trouble to complete the sentence.

George stretched his arms above his head and yawned. "Any time you want real information, y'oughta come to me. I know."

"Spring it, Brains."

"Chiquita Baca—you know Chiquita—used to cook for Sam one time—she told me about a year ago when I stopped on the road to mend a busted wagon tongue for her—and I'm here to remark there's never anything busted about Chiquita's tongue. Seems like the older they grow the more they talk."

"Like yourself," chipped in Aurelian. "You remind me of Chiquita—travel ten miles to go two."

"Gimme time," said George placidly. "Always open a good egg slowly. It might be bad. You can take your choice of this one. Chiquita told me that when she was throwin' together *enchiladas* in the Lazy S kitchen Ruff Lanigan and Cal Collins came to see Sam, and she heard Ruff offer to buy the ranch for about a quarter of its value. She said Sam he laughed in their faces. Huh? Oh, it was that time last year when you were over at Fairview for a couple months with Charlie Yaple. Time you got back I'd forgot it. Funny how these things slip a fellah's mind till one day they crop up like a boil on your neck. How you like the egg?"

Weston ostentatiously clothespinned his nose with two fingers. "There's your proof, Reely, and if you want my opinion it's a full-grown grizzly with all its claws."

"I'm using the hides of three of 'em for rugs right now." Aurelian said with becoming modesty. "We'll attend to Number Four, George and me."

"Happy days for li'l brother," George murmured sarcastically.

It was at this juncture that Counselor O'Keefe entered the office with a wry expression and a folded document. He nodded shortly to the two ranchmen and laid the document on Weston's desk. "The mortgage."

"Thank you, Counselor, thank you. I trust you left your client resting more easily."

"He seems to have lost his appetite," O'Keefe returned without the flicker of a smile. "No, thank you. I don't smoke—rope."

Aurelian waited until the sound of O'Keefe's boot heels had died on the sidewalk. Then:

"What you going to tell Mis' Gordon about this mortgage business?"

"I don't know exactly," Weston replied frankly. "I don't want to worry her."

"Better tell her the truth. She can be trusted with it."

"What—precisely—is the truth?" Weston bent a thoughtful eye upon his advisor.

"The confession of Sockless Hank," Aurelian said hastily. "No need to tell her I gave it to you. You can lie out o' that easy, a fine lawyer like you."

Weston bowed from his collar button. "Accept the thanks of my profession. Candidly, Aurelian, how did you manage it?"

Aurelian stared blankly at the wall, and became poetical:

> "The boy climbed up the steeple,
> And in the crowd he fell.
> The people told the sexton,
> And the sexton tolled the bell."

"Huh?"

"Do you want the sexton to toll that bell for me too?"

"Well, no, I don't believe I do."

"Then what you don't know you won't talk about in your sleep. So long, Gabby. We've got to find Minnesota Thompson and the other two boys and tell 'em they're hired again."

IV

"Of course, there's a couple of Dineen's Mexicans out there, Minnesota, but I expect you can attend to them all right."

"I expect *so*," grinned Minnesota Thompson, a long-geared, blue-eyed gentleman who had first seen the light of day under a Red River cart. "I'll tell Tom and Dick. They ain't enjoyin' their present job with the stage company. When's the lady comin' out? Yeah? We'll have everythin' fine for her, Reely, and you can stick a pin in that."

"Reely," said George, as they were walking on down the street, "where *did* you get that cowhide?"

"From the corral fence of Cruz Tranquilino Ortega y Ortiz. Beefed that very evenin'. weighed a ton, green that-away. Gave him four bits for it."

"Maybe it'll get back to Ruff and Cal. Cruz Tranquilino—"

"Cruz Tranquilino was too drunk to know anything except he sold a cowhide—in the dark. Didn't see my face a-tall. Huh? Sure I got rid of it—under the rocks in the wash from Tularosa Cañon. So that's all right. I wish Dineen hadn't been hurt. I'd kind of like to settle with him right away. Now I'll have to wait weeks maybe, till he's better. There's always something, ain't there?"

"Here comes something—our own Ruff. Maybe—"

"Maybe nothin'. He'll say 'Howdy,' happy as a hawg on ice. You'll see. Gimme the makin's. Got a match?"

"Why don't you buy some for yourself? I ain't any store."

"If I told you what you are, you wouldn't like it. 'Lo, Ruff. How's tricks?"

"Comin' in bunches, Reely. Howdy, George." Thus passed Ruff Lanigan, not perhaps as happily as the hog on ice, but at least with outward amity.

"Told you how it would be, George," whispered Aurelian, when the Flying H manager was out of earshot. "Hank's running away and Ruff's face a minute back prove it. Ol' Sockless told 'em the truth just as I knew he would, and none of 'em believed him. Who would? A feller dressed up in a cowhide. You wouldn't believe it yourself."

CHAPTER FIVE

THANKSGIVING

I

THE day before Thanksgiving and not a turkey in the place! "Why, ma'am," intoned Sugar Roebuck, spreading hamlike hands flat on the counter and smiling ingratiatingly upon Mrs. Gordon, "this country ain't civilized enough for tame turkeys, and it's too civilized for the wild ones. Got to go back in the hills to get 'em. There ain't hardly time if you want one right away. But how about some nice bacon, Chicago brand, or"—as Mrs. Gordon wrinkled her pretty nose—"some Extra A One corned beef, Gallegher's Best? No? Well, I still got some o' that cow Cruz Tranquilino beefed a while back. It's kept fine, and where it ain't I trimmed the high spots."

"Thank you," murmured Mrs. Gordon hopelessly. "I am—ah—beefing my own."

"Oh, sure, you would be. I forgot. Was there anything else, ma'am?"

"Four dozen cans of condensed milk, Lily White brand."

"Lily White? Sure. Shipment of that came in on the wagon yesterday. It ain't unloaded. I'll skip right out and fly at it. If anybody comes in, tell 'em to lay the price on the counter or wait till I get back."

As the back door banged behind Sugar the front door opened. Mrs. Gordon did not turn her head. She was inspecting a bolt of print goods. A too familiar voice broke unpleasantly on her ears with, "Hello, little one. All alone, huh?"

Mrs. Gordon turned a shoulder on Dineen with a shiver of disgust. "Mr. Roebuck is within call."

"Much good may it do *you*." Dineen moved close to her and draped himself sidewise against the counter, his eyes roving over the lady with acrid amusement. "Ditched me the other day for that cow-walloper, didn't you?"

Mrs. Gordon started to walk toward the rear of the store. Dineen seized her wrist and whirled her back. With all a well-bred city woman's distaste for a scene she bit back the scream that rose to her lips. "Let me go," she said quietly.

"*When* I'm through with you, and that'll be after I've shown you it doesn't pay to fool with Four Ace Dineen. I take what I want."

Roughly he jerked her toward him. Now she tried to utter the scream her town-bred training had hitherto held back. But it was too late. She was in Dineen's arms, the breath of her body squeezed out against his chest, her tender mouth crushed under the onslaught of his avid lips.

II

"All this ride for just one," complained George.

"I got it, didn't I?"

"Sure, but why wouldn't a good fat piece of beef done just as well?"

"I must be gettin' particular," said Aurelian. "If there ain't the Lazy S buckboard standin' in front of the Golden Rule! Guess I'll just step in and see if—uh— *You* might go buy yourself a drink, George."

"I will, dammit. Several of 'em. Of all the fools I ever saw you're the oldest piece of pie."

But the oldest piece of pie was by this time off his horse and striding blithely into the store, incidentally almost treading on the flat heels of Mrs. Jane Strong, the gossipy wife of Bill Strong. George rode on, but the uproar and tumult starting within the Golden Rule store immediately

subsequent to Aurelian's entry brought him back on the jump.

Aurelian, entering abruptly, his eyesight somewhat blurred by the sudden transition from the bright sunlight of the street to the darkened interior of the store, saw dimly across the interested sunbonnet of Mrs. Strong a man and a woman in what was apparently a close embrace. He perceived almost at once that the woman was struggling to escape from the clasp of the man, and that the man was Dineen, the very gentleman to whom he had been extending the courtesy of a complete recovery before settling his outstanding account. It was obvious to the blindest that the gambler was himself again.

Aurelian slid past the edified Mrs. Strong, slipped his left hand under Dineen's hat, grabbed a handful of Dineen's hair and yanked. "Let the lady go, Four Ace. What—*Mis' Gordon*!"

It was then that Dineen found himself deeply involved in a tornado, a tornado that picked him up and slammed him down, that flailed the counters with his heels and sent the stove pipe flying with his head, that finally raised him aloft and hurled him into the November sunshine. It did not matter in the least that the closed door stood in the way. Dineen went through the obstacle with a crash and sat upon the sidewalk amongst splinters and the door hardware.

Aurelian, boiling with a fury he had never before experienced, stood upon the doorstep. "Protect yourself, Four Ace," said he in a voice as cold as his rage was hot.

It speaks well for the gambler's courage, to say nothing of the stamina and recuperative powers of a body that had gone through what his had, that he obeyed instructions without a split second's delay. Aurelian instantly shot him four times, and spread him on the planking as flat as a fish.

Men arrived—from all directions. They came not with any appearance of undue haste or curiosity, for that is not the New Mexican manner, but they came. They were County Clerk Monaker of the long nose and prying eyes, County Treasurer Wryneck, his hands in his own pockets for once, County Attorney Shillaber, known in the community as Roaring Jack, Sheriff Cahoon, Ruidoso Red, Corny Burgoyne, the first deputy, Fat and Sim, late election officials, Timbo the blacksmith with his hoofrasp, Sugar Roebuck, a can of Lily White gripped in each fist, housewives hoping for a bit of excitement with which to spice their otherwise drab existence, Bill Jackson and other stray ranchmen, and of course men about town, each equipped for daily labor with a jackknife and a whittling stick. Rosebud was on the spot.

Aurelian looked at what lay on the reddening planks, saw that the thing moved not, and calmly proceeded to eject the spent shells and reload his gun. He remained in position, blocking the doorway. Mrs. Gordon should have all the time she needed to pull herself together. Aurelian noted that Corny Burgoyne was bending over the body of the gambler, and that the three county officials were holding whispered conversation with the sheriff. It also did not escape his attention that George, Ruidoso Red, and another friend of his, Bill Jackson no less, were pushing purposefully in the direction of the whisperers.

Sheriff Cahoon stepped to the front, contriving as he did so to slide with his foot over the edge of the sidewalk the pistol that had fallen from Dineen's hand. "Find a six-shooter, Corny?"

"Didn't see any, Sheriff," replied the deputy, carefully slitting the gambler's upper clothing.

"Then this shooting don't look good to me," the sheriff declared with emphatic harshness. "Guess we'll have to lock up Reely."

"Is that so?" queried the gentleman in question. "You

just kicked Dineen's gun over the edge of the sidewalk. I saw you."

It was the blacksmith who recovered the gun. Quickly he opened it before the sheriff could snatch it from him. and removed an exploded shell. "Fired one, I see. You want it, Sheriff? Here y' are. I guess we all saw that spent shell."

The blacksmith was also a friend of Aurelian's.

"Reely fired first," spoke up the county treasurer.

"That's a lie," declared Aurelian from the step.

"I saw—" began the county treasurer.

"I say you're a liar too," said a voice in one of the official ears.

Wryneck turned and looked into the unpleasant gray eyes of George O'Riley and became aware that he was also undergoing the scowling scrutiny of both Ruidoso Red and Bill Jackson. The sedentary heart of County Treasurer Wryneck performed a creditable flip-flop.

"Well, I thought I saw it that way," he backwatered gracefully.

"Your thoughts are as crooked as your books," declared the truculent George in a loud, unsympathetic tone.

"Look here—" began Wryneck.

"I'm lookin'."

Men had withdrawn from the immediate vicinity of the county treasurer as though the words of George O'Riley had been a swinging pick handle. Wryneck felt very much alone. He gulped painfully. "I—uh—well—of course, I may not have seen—"

"I'm talkin' about your books now. I'm sayin' they're as crooked as you are. Want to take it up?"

"Here, here, what's all this?" It was the sheriff speaking.

"None of your business!" countered George swiftly.

"Don't start any fights around here!" blustered the sheriff. "I won't have it."

"You won't have your office either—after five weeks," George flung in his face.

"Hey, Sheriff!" shouted the tactful Burgoyne. "Four Ace ain't dead. Get a wagon and we'll take him home."

The sheriff, glad of the interruption, whirled back to the body on the sidewalk and squatted beside it. "Looked to me like he'd been drilled plumb center."

"Two bullets through his left shoulder, and two glanced off his ribs. Lost a lot of blood, but he'll pull through all right."

Hearing which, Aurelian, in whom the rage died when the man fell, was not displeased. He was no killer. Dineen would have been the first to fall to his gun in a personal encounter. Of course he had seen trouble through the smoke, but had never actually eliminated from the land of the living any human except in the way of trade on a very few occasions when he and George had caught Mexicans or Indians engaged in nefarious activities. Such affairs in those days were considered not worth wasting thought upon.

The sheriff had gone in search of a wagon. Corny Burgoyne, having completed a fair job of bandaging with a second-hand sheet, was rolling a cigarette. The crowd was breaking up. The county officials had been the first to go.

"All right, Corny?" Aurelian said from his post on the steps.

"Sure," replied the first deputy with an impish grin. "Another even break. We all saw the spent shell."

"My shirt felt the lead it held," said Aurelian, exhibiting a rent in his sleeve. He turned to peer through the shattered door. Mrs. Gordon was standing at the counter talking quietly to Mrs. Strong. The only sign of the recent contretemps borne by the Eastern lady was an unwonted color in her smooth cheeks, which made her handsomer than ever.

"They don't make 'em more thoroughbred than that," Aurelian said to himself, and for some reason the thought did not make him happy. "Hey, Sugar," he called. "You've got customers."

III

"Let me help you with those," said Aurelian, and without waiting for a reply, scooped up Mrs. Gordon's purchases and held open the door for her. With hot cheeks she walked past him. As though he had been accustomed to performing such acts for women all his life, he bestowed his armful of groceries under the seat and helped Mrs. Gordon between the wheels.

"I—" she began tremulously, for the sight of the staring stains on the sidewalk were enough to shake any woman's poise—"I—"

"Wait a second. I—I've got something for you."

He hurried to his horse and returned with the limp and feathered form of a huge wild turkey. "Picked him up over on the reservation," said he, stowing it carefully in the back of the buckboard where any possible drip wouldn't matter. "I thought maybe you'd like it for Thanksgiving. You drive in alone?"

"Mr. Thompson is with me, but he saw one of our mules in Mr. Jackson's bunch, and he stopped there to borrow a saddle horse and catch it. I'll pick him up on my way back. Mr. O'Riley, I—"

"Then that's all right," Mr. O'Riley said hastily, and backed away. "Hope you like the turkey, ma'am."

The dark eyes of the lady sparkled. "If you don't come back here this instant I'll scream! There, that's better. You act as if you thought I'd bite."

"No, ma'am, no, only I've got business, and—"

"You didn't have any pressing engagement a few minutes ago when—"

"Don't say a word. Mis' Gordon. It was a short horse, curried quick. I—I'll see you again."

"Wait a moment. I can still scream if necessary. Really, you are the most annoying person. Don't you like to be thanked?"

Aurelian reddened painfully. "Why, Mis' Gordon, I—uh—I—" He began to flounder like a bogged cow.

Her eyes deepened. Her smile warmed his pumping heart. "You know what I think, don't you?" she asked.

"Nun-no. I've got to be goin'."

"Please fix this buckle for me, won't you?" Pleadingly she held out the reins.

Aurelian, scarlet to the tips of his ears, took the leather lines as though they had been hot wires. "I don't see—"

"You'll have to look closely. Something's the matter with the tongue. It's wobbly." His head bent. So did hers. It may have been the buckle tongue she meant, but certainly her own tongue was none too steady as she whispered in a soft voice. "I really must be allowed to say 'thank you!' There, there, don't jump. All over. Won't you and your brother come to dinner to-morrow, Thanksgiving, and help us eat the turkey? I—we'll be glad to have you."

"Mis' Gordon, I—we'll be tickled to death."

IV

"Our turkey!" squalled George. "Our turkey we rode a full day and a half to get!"

"It was me shot it," Aurelian pointed out severely. "You just went along for—for the ride."

"I did, hey! Reely, I could— *Our turkey!* What you want to go give it to her for? Let her get her own turkeys."

"Aw, stop your yowling," Aurelian said soothingly. "Fellah's got to help a lady—always."

"Fellah don't have to give her a turkey—the biggest I ever saw."

"You're the biggest hawg *I* ever saw. Grudgin' to make a lady happy. Y'oughta be ashamed of yourself."

"I ain't ashamed. I'm mad. I had my teeth all set for both drumsticks."

"Maybe she'll give you one—if you ask her pretty."

"Huh?"

"She's asked you and me both to dinner to-morrow. You needn't get chesty though. She had to ask you, because you're my brother. But you don't have to go. I'll explain how you had to stay home to—fix the windmill."

"Nemmine any explainin'. You ain't anxious to have me go because you're sweet on the lady, and you don't want company. Well, you'll have company. I want to see your face when you bust your lower jaw on that bird, and fetch loose the upper one on her biscuit. I know those town gals. Can't cook, can't sew, and a jag o' washin' tears 'em apart. Plumb useless. You'll see. Oh, to-morrow's meal will cure you, cowboy. If I didn't have the innards of a goat myself I wouldn't dare risk it."

"The innards ain't all you got of a goat. You've got his wits too. My own brother. I don't understand it. You'd ought to be half sensible."

"I got sense enough to stay single anyway. I know when I'm well off, I do. I don't fall in splash every time a girl flips an eyewinker at me."

"But such eyewinkers, George."

"Sure, hang your hat on 'em anywhere! She— Oh, my Gawd!"

Which pious exclamation was called forth by the sudden convulsive spring of George's horse, followed by the snapping of the short latigo and the depositing of George and his saddle against the stiff and needlelike leaves of a soapweed. Aurelian, his tongue in his cheek, took down his rope and pursued the rapidly departing horse.

"Here's your hatrack," he said ten minutes later. "Good thing I was ridin' Brown Jug, or I'd never got close enough to hang a rope on him. Did you get all the stickers out?" he added solicitously.

"Stickers? What stickers?" asked George, busily reaming holes for repairs in the short latigo.

"I notice you movin' tender, kind of."

"You want to get your eyes examined. Cut off one of your long saddle strings, will you? They're newer than mine."

Aurelian, dismounting to comply with the request, was promptly slammed backward into the very soapweed with which George had recently made acquaintance.

"There!" yelped George vindictively. "Think I didn't see you kick my horse! How you like being a pincushion yourself?"

Limber Aurelian rolled over and jackknifed imperturbably to his feet. "You're forgettin', Georgianna, I halfsoled these pants with cowhide only last week. What was you sayin' about eyewinkers?"

"Never heard of such things," declared George, who knew when he was licked. "Pass me that saddle string."

V

"Do you think they enjoyed it?"

"Enjoyed it!" Aurelian peered between the chintz window curtains at his brother and Minnesota and Tom and Dick, foregathering with cigarettes on the sunny side of the squeezer. "George had two helpings of everything and he's unbuckling his belt two holes right now, the terrapin."

She laughed. It was a happy laugh. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. She looked happy too—but she hadn't scratched the surface of desert existence yet. She didn't realize what such a life meant. An Eastern

woman. How could she? "Time'll tell," he said to himself—not with any too much confidence.

She had filled the dishpan with boiling water and dropped in the gypsum-colored lumps of sal soda that are necessary for effectual washing of dishes in a land where the only soft water is the rain water reserved for drinking purposes and the washing of clothes. Her sleeves were rolled above the firm flesh of her elbows—flesh that was no shade darker than the flour marks on her pink-and-white checked apron.

With her hands on the edge of the washpan waiting for the sal soda to soften and dissolve, she looked through the window, past the corrals and the windmill, across the sweeping levels, yellow, green and brown, at the red Sweetwater country and the peak above it, dark against the northern sky.

"I'm learning their names," she told him. "That rocky big fellow is Salinas, and there's Sheep Mountain to the east and north. But Mr. Thompson tells me that flat-topped mountain in between hasn't any name. Why hasn't it?"

"Never needed one, I expect."

"At home even the little hills have names."

"That's because they're used more or less. Here we don't use the mountains so much, unless we're miner folks or on the dodge. A mountain is something to be avoided as a rule. But we always name the cañons in between."

"Why the cañons always and not the mountains?" sliding a dish slowly into the cloudy water, and reaching for the dish mop.

"Back East you don't name the blocks of houses, do you? But the streets are all named or numbered, aren't they? The cañons are our streets. That's why they have names. That cañon between Salinas and Nameless is Lee Cañon. Sly Gap is the other side of Nameless. Then comes Stanton Gap, named after the gov'ment telegraph line

from Lava Station to Fort Stanton. And that's the way it goes all up and down the mountains."

She gave him a long, slow look as she handed him the dish to wipe. "You're awfully utilitarian, aren't you?"

"We have to be—in this country."

"I've noticed that."

"You're beginning to like it?" he ventured.

She did not reply until four more dishes had made the passage of the dishpan. Then, "It's different—a lot."

"Three weeks ago you wouldn't have said 'a lot'."

"One learns." Which was a crooked answer capable of many meanings. Aurelian went on wiping dishes in silence. He wondered whether, after all, that dinner had been such a howling success.

CHAPTER SIX

MOTHER LOVE

I

AURELIAN, trailing a bunch of six recently bought horses that were returning to their former home at the John Cross, was glad, for he was out of matches, to see a dust cloud on the Old Spanish Road to El Paso that signified the presence and progress of a wagon. He spurred sure-footed Tornillo across the hummocky low ground that was called Hayfield Draw and headed the wagon—two wagons to be exact, lead and trail, drawn by eight mules, and driven by his old friend Philip the Freighter.

Philip, glad to see a white man, even one who had hornswoggled him out of whisky and other cherished possessions, pulled up as Aurelian breasted the slope below the road. "Yee-ow, y' ol' horse thief," he bellowed, dismounting hospitably, "which I never expected to see you on this highroad of hell. *My* Gawd, ain't it hot for the middle of January? Weather ain't what she used to be, Reely."

Aurelian, sitting at ease on bay Tornillo, pushed his hat back from his damp forehead. "This is a tropical country, Philip."

"Yes, I know. Pa'm trees and everything. I like to froze to death out on the flat in front of Cottonwood last night. Breeze blowin' over from the Jornada with an icicle on every whisker. Slide down off your bonerack and be happy. I got me a new deck of cards from Jumping Jack at the Triangle E and I'd like to try 'em on you."

"No thanks, you cheat," Aurelian said freely.

"Mean to say you won't gimme a chance to win back

what I lost?" squealed the freighter. "And you wearing my watch this minute."

"And George is wearing your gun, and we drank your whisky and spent your money. I wouldn't want to rob you again, Philip. I got a conscience, if you haven't, but I'm plumb afoot for a match. Got any? Thanks. What's new?"

"Four Ace Dineen goin' huntin'," was the sufficiently surprising reply.

"That's an odd number," said Aurelian slowly.

"I never heard of him huntin' before, either. But I saw him comin' toward me at the Salt Creek crossing a half hour back, driving a buckboard with a shotgun between his knees. 'Who you after, Four Ace?' I yells at him, jokin'. Known the scoundrel a long time, I have. Used to freight supplies for his wife's folks over at Three Rivers. Saw a lot of him when he was courtin' Flo. Used to think Flo had plenty sense till she hooked traces with him final. 'Who you after, Four Ace?' I says. You know he never answered me, just hunched up like on the seat and rolled kersplash through Salt Creek, and turned off northwest toward the Lazy S. Say, Reely— Now what in hell hit Reely! I'd sure hate to ride a horse that fast through Hayfield."

In a lightning flash of thought before he turned his horse, it had struck Aurelian: Four Ace, not man enough to confine the slaking of his hate to another personal encounter with Aurelian, was revenging himself on Mrs. Gordon. That Dineen was up and about, his wounds healed and health regained, he had heard from a John Cross boy. This drive for revenge was doubtless his first bit of activity since recovery. Aurelian hoped to make it his last.

II

Four Ace Dineen and a shotgun spinning toward the Lazy S! Ten precious minutes lost talking to Philip! Al-

lowing for wear and tear on the freighter's memory in regard to the lapse of time, a conservative estimate of the gambler's handicap over Aurelian was a good forty-five minutes. Forty-five minutes and six miles to go. Dineen was at the Lazy S already!

Aurelian plied his quirt cross-handed, and continually he raked Tornillo's flanks with the spurs. Bay Tornillo, big and speedy, clamped his jaws on the bit and galloped faster than he ever had in cutting back a steer bent on escaping from a held bunch.

Aurelian, with a sick, all-gone sensation at the pit of his stomach, recalled seeing a dust cloud in the north above the ridge west of Salt Creek as he rode along on the trail of his six horses. That dust cloud without doubt had been cast up by the wheels and hoofs of Dineen's buckboard and team. But he had only seen the top of the cloud above the ridge, and his casual glance had mistaken it for a dust devil in the swag beyond.

He saw no dust in the north now. There were other folds and swags and ridges between that first ridge and the Lazy S, as well as the short-grass country, a long stretch of open ground in front of Sulphur Cañon, where the passing of a team would be unmarked by dust. Then:

"Hup, Tornillo!" and Aurelian wrapped his quirt around the big bay's stomach with the full strength of his arm. He had just remembered a long and deep arroyo beyond the short-grass country that Dineen would be compelled to drive around, thus lengthening his journey by at least four miles, while Tornillo might be able to leap it. O'Riley had never jumped any of his horses more than ten feet, and the arroyo was from fifteen to forty feet in width.

He recalled the location of a narrow place not more than a hundred yards east of his line. But even this narrow place would be a perilous pass, because the bank of an arroyo is no take-off for the light-minded. A mere

touch will sometimes cake off several tons of baked earth. But he had to risk it. He absolutely *had* to, with Four Ace Dineen, red revenge in his heart and a shotgun between his knees, rolling full split toward the Lazy S and Mrs. Gordon.

"Why didn't I think of that and kill him first!" he groaned between clenched teeth. "I might have known he'd be ripe for murder!"

Tornillo nipped up a rise, swooped through a swag, helter-skeltered along a gravelly wash between two humps and soared like a homing pigeon out into the short-grass country. Here he laid his stomach to the ground and fled loose-reined. A prairie-dog town lay directly in his path. Providence, not Aurelian, guided his hoofs, and he laid the burrows behind him unstopped and unhurt. The badger, sturdy mainstay of the shaving-brush industry, had dug many a home in the short-grass country,—regular traps, large enough to accommodate a horse's leg to the shoulder.

But Tornillo crossed the short-grass country without a stagger and Aurelian hardened his heart for the jump that lay ahead. Cow saddles are not built for leaping purposes, and any carelessness during the leap may easily result in a snapped neck for the rider. That of course was altogether beside the fact that this particular acrobatic feat stood considerably more than a fair chance of winding up in a mush of flesh and leather among the rocks in the bottom of the arroyo.

Big Tornillo swept through the greasewood covering the long slope that broke down from the short-grass country as though he were crossing a flat. The gash of the arroyo lay at the foot of the slope. The brush thinned ahead and Aurelian saw the sunlight shining on the opposite bank of the arroyo. God! It was wide! Tornillo, wisest of horses, pointed his ears. Did his master expect him to jump this dry cut? He laid back one ear in expectation

of a pull at the reins. But there was no increase in the pressure. Tornillo pointed the ear again and shortened his stride for the take-off. He knew as well as his master how unstable are an arroyo's banks.

Aurelian saw the arroyo widen over his horse's ears, and too late to turn the horse saw a crack in the bank two feet back from the edge. But Tornillo saw the crack too. He timed his stride perfectly, and took off behind the crack. Aurelian, toeing his stirrups, felt the savage heave of the powerful hindquarters as the big horse rose in the air. The arroyo, blue-gray at the bottom with the rocks of the wash, gaped beneath him like the expectant jaws of a prehistoric monster. A sliding shock, a jar that wrenched Aurelian from belt to neck, and the horse struck the ground with his front hoofs. The hind hoofs cut the edge of the bank close, too close to the break. The earth gave way with a spurt of dust. Tornillo staggered, caught himself on three legs and tore on.

The Moore Well lay half a mile ahead in a swag between two low ridges. It was a long mile from the Moore Well to the Lazy S ranch house. Tornillo was beginning to pant, but he did not slacken speed,—not with quirt and spurs urging him on. Dropping down the slope to the well, Aurelian saw that the gate into the Moore Well pasture had been left open. As he galloped past the gaunt and creaking windmill, he noted no fresh tracks of light wheels turning through the gate into the ranch road. Dineen must have entered by the west gate.

Aurelian drove the failing Tornillo up the slope without mercy. From the top of the ridge he saw the flat beyond with the stand of buff and buckskin-colored 'dobe buildings that was the Lazy S ranch, clumped under great cottonwoods in the middle of it. Saw more than the ranch. Saw in the west a buckboard pulled by two horses rolling toward the ranch at moderate speed. And that buckboard was no farther from the ranch than he was. He could

not hope to cut it off, because between them zigzagged an arroyo that he knew was too wide to jump. This arroyo shelved out and quit a hundred feet from the ranch gate. If he could reach the head of the arroyo first—Tornillo went down the slope of the ridge like a yearling steer with a beef-hungry grizzly reaching for his tail. Instantly the buckboard team began to gallop.

Aurelian, in this emphatic moment, yearned for his Winchester. With that accurate firearm he could have put a period at four hundred yards to Dineen's existence. He had only his six-shooter. Instinctively his hand dropped to assure him that that friend at least was ready. His fingers found nothing but an empty holster.

Aurelian immediately began to perspire as copiously as his horse. An empty holster, no weapon but a pocketknife, and a battle in imminent prospect: Sir Geraint without armor or weapons! Young David minus his sling! It is such a situation that brings out the iron in a man's soul. "Damn you, Tornillo! Hop to it!"

Hope is hard to stifle. There was a bare chance that Mrs. Gordon might be out. But that chance was killed a hundred yards farther on when three chestnut horses appeared beyond a clump of mesquite. He recognized them even at that distance as the three horses, the only three gentle horses on the place, that constituted Mrs. Gordon's string of mounts.

That she was alone at the ranch house he knew, because he had seen Minnesota three days before and the foreman had told him that he was starting work the next day on a line camp at a water under Gunsight Peak, a job that would require the exertions of all three of the Lazy S boys.

How that buckboard team could travel! Tornillo was failing fast. The grass-fed can never hope to attain the staying powers of the grain-fed. Aurelian reached down and began with frantic fingers to slip his cinch. It is a

trick to slip a saddle at top speed, but an expert rider can manage it. Aurelian was an expert.

With the bridle reins locked between his teeth Aurelian worked loose the long latigo. Taking care to drag up both latigo and fishcord cinch to the end, that Tornillo might not be tripped, Aurelian eased himself backward and rolled the saddle upward by the horn. With a jerk he freed both saddle and blanket and flung both sidewise. Then he slid into position behind Tornillo's withers. The horse, his burden lessened by forty-five pounds of dead weight, lengthened again the great-hearted stride that had been perceptibly slowing and shortening.

Aurelian's slitted eyes saw that Dineen was lashing his team with a bullwhip, and that neither man had the edge in the mad race. Tornillo's rider perceived that he could not head Dineen at the arroyo's end. It would be nip and tuck to catch him at the gate.

"Pile him," resolved Aurelian. "It's my best bet."

Dineen's best bet would have been to have lifted the shotgun and filled Aurelian full of lead as their courses converged. But the gambler appeared strangely lacking in initiative. His one thought apparently was to reach the gate first.

The lightened Tornillo was going like a demon, but so were Dineen's two horses. It was obvious that rider and driver would reach the gate simultaneously. It was very close now. Standing wide open, of course, at the one time when it should have been closed.

The head of the arroyo was past. The dust flew from the bare, packed ground in front of the gate. The gambler's figure, his boots braced against the dashboard, was black in the sunshine. How his hat remained on his head in the breeze of his passage was the mystery of the moment. He was strangely silent, but his arm plied the bullwhip without restraint.

Twenty yards to go. Ten yards, two more jumps. Now

it is well known that a horse will avoid a collision if he may. But Tornillo was in a frenzy from such a beating and spurring as his hide had never felt before. His heavy shoulders drove into the flanks of the off horse as the brassbound end of the pole flashed past the gateposts. Then—Aurelian found himself scrabbling in a recently made flowerbed with his mouth full of fresh earth. Tornillo was bucking to a halt twenty yards away; both team horses were down and kicking, the buckboard, splintered wood and twisted iron, had wrapped itself around a gatepost, and in the dust, a horse length beyond the thrashing heads of the fallen team, the gambler's body lay quietly crumpled across the barrels of a shotgun.

III

Aurelian, unhurt barring a bruised shoulder, ran to the fallen man, rolled him over on his back to free the shotgun, and looked into the face, not of Four Ace Dineen, but of his wife, Flo.

Flying footsteps, a rush of skirts, and Mrs. Gordon was on her knees beside the senseless figure. "Wha-why, it's a woman!"

"Makes out to be," said Aurelian. "She'll be all right in two shakes. Arms and legs seem to be all right. Just knocked sillier than usual, I guess. I'll carry her out to the shed."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. The idea! We'll carry her into the house and put her to bed. You take her feet. What on earth were you trying to do, Mr. O'Riley? I saw the whole thing from the end of the corral. Couldn't you stop your horse?"

"I didn't try," was the succinct reply. "Tell you about it later. Mind the step. Set her down on the edge of the bed, and I'll pull her boots off."

"Never mind the boots now. It doesn't matter about the

bed. Poor thing! How pale she is. Mr. O'Riley, you must have been mad!"

"I was worse than that," admitted Mr. O'Riley. "The poor thing came here to shoot you. It's Dineen's wife."

Mrs. Gordon's hand stilled on the shirt collar she had been loosening. She stared palely at Aurelian across the bed. "Dineen's wife!" she muttered uncomprehendingly.

"Her. I thought it was Dineen. I saw Freighter Philip south of the Salt Creek Crossing and he said he saw Dineen heading this way with a shotgun, and he didn't speak to Philip. I'd never heard of Dineen hunting any, so I thought I'd better stop him first and see what he wanted."

Mrs. Gordon had recovered from her momentary shock and was bathing Flo's forehead with a wet washrag.

Aurelian set Flo's boots neatly side by side at the foot of the bed. "I don't know why she felt called to mix up in this. Dineen has the name of mending his own fences, but he's a bad *hombre,* and you can't always figure out what a man like that will do."

"Evidently." Mrs. Gordon continued to bathe the forehead of the gambler's wife. "She's coming to, I think."

Flo's eyelids fluttered. She opened her eyes and looked up into the face of Mrs. Gordon. She blinked and fixed her gaze on Aurelian with as venomous a regard as he had ever seen. "Dineen will fix you for this, O'Riley!" she snarled, her fingers hooking on the white counterpane like the claws of a wildcat.

"I thought you were Dineen," said Aurelian calmly.

"And as for you, you white-faced lollop!" continued Flo in her feline snarl. "You're safe for now, but I'll be back. This country ain't big enough for you and me."

"You lie down," said Mrs. Gordon quietly. "You've had a severe shock. There's a bump on your head the size of an apple. Lie down. Compose yourself."

"Take your hands off me!" screamed Flo, squirming

with fury. "I'll teach you to try to take away the husband of a decent woman. You needn't look so innocent at me. I know how you were hugging and kissing my husband in the Golden Rule the day before Thanksgiving."

"Mrs. Gordon, you go out in the kitchen," said Aurelian sharply. "I'll straighten this out."

"I'll straighten it out myself."

But it was not Mrs. Gordon or Aurelian who straightened it out. It was a little old woman with bright blue eyes who swept into the bedroom like a whirlwind and bent a glare upon Flo that literally curled her up like an orange peel in a hot fire. Without paying any attention to either Mrs. Gordon or Aurelian, and without any preliminary speech whatsoever, the little old woman leaned over the bed and slapped Flo full swing across the mouth.

"I'll teach you to jump the reservation!" she shrilled.

"Mom! Mom! leave me alone! I—"

"Speak when you're spoken to!" Smack! Harder this time. Flo covered her face with her hands and began to whimper. The little old woman again raised her hand. "Do you want another?" Flo choked back her sobs.

"Don't strike her!" remonstrated Mrs. Gordon, recovering the poise which had been disintegrated somewhat by the entry of the surprising newcomer. "She—she's hurt!"

"She'll be hurt worse if she disobeys me," replied the old woman. "I ask your pardon, ma'am," she continued, with a bob of her head, "for coming in without knocking, but I heard Flo's yowl and I knew she needed correction quick. I'm her mother. Mis' Powers is my name." She removed her man's hat and began to fan her face with it. "Hot weather for this time of year, ain't it? Unseasonable, I call it."

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Powers?" invited Mrs. Gordon. "Mr. O'Riley, will you bring a chair for my guest?"

"Oh, it's you, is it, Reely? I declare I was so excited

when I came in I didn't recognize you." She sank gratefully on the chair, rested a surprisingly small and neatly shod foot on the edge of the bed, and looked benevolently and with whole-hearted admiration at Mrs. Gordon. "I ask your pardon again, ma'am, for Flo's conduct. I declare, if she'd hurt you, I'd have whipped her back till the blood ran. I raised all my children, fourteen head corral count, to do right, and they're going to do right or I'll know why. It don't make any difference whether they're married or not, I'm boss and they know it. And if you don't think so, Flo Dineen, you start something. I told Flo last evening when she started yelling around—you see, I came down to stay with Flo while Dineen was gettin' well. He's O. K. now, but I wasn't completely satisfied with the way he's been actin' toward Flo, so I been extendin' my visit, sort of. Dineen's a good boy when I'm around, and don't you forget it. Well, as I was sayin', Flo was squallin' all over the 'dobe last night how Dineen"—here the old person coughed delicately—"embraced you in Sugar Roebuck's half-a-dozen different times—"

"Half-a-dozen different times!" cried Mrs. Gordon.

"Gossip grows, ma'am. Well, as I was sayin', Flo was upset like a kettle of water on the stove—just sizzlin'. You're a girl yourself, ma'am, and you know how girls are. A body's got to make allowances, so I didn't pay much attention. I let her blow off at Dineen, and he denied it like a man will, and he went back to work final. Flo, she kept it up and kept it up. I couldn't take any comfort a-tall. So just to satisfy myself, I went down to see Mis' Jones, who told her the story, Flo said. Well, Mis' Jones—you listen hard, Flo. This is for you too—Mis' Jones, she got the tale when she was helpin' Sue Tate with her washin'. I went to see Sue. Sue, she said Mamie Maginnis told her, and Mamie said Daley's good-for-nothing hussy of a daughter told her. That's the way it went. I kept on from one to another, and final I traced the liquor

plumb back to the right bunghole, and that bunghole was Jane Strong. She'd been in the store that time it happened, and she saw Dineen grab you and you pullin' away right smart to get loose, and she embroidered what she saw like it was a baby's christenin' dress back east in Dakota where I was raised. But I got it all out of her, every bit. Shucks, Reely, I don't blame you throwin' Dineen round the store and pluggin' him four times. Served him right. I laid Jane Strong out proper, I can tell you. These gossipin' women make me sick. They can make more trouble than a skunk in church. And of course Flo was the last one to hear the story. The wife always is, whether it's true or a lie. Flo, you fool, this lady wouldn't wipe her feet on Dineen. You know it.

"Well, I left Jane Strong a-weepin' a rainstorm, and came back to Flo's to tell Flo how come, and she was gone. I figured she'd gone down to Dineen's place, so I went to bed. About two o'clock Dineen come home alone and drunk. So I skirmished around and found Dineen's other suit was gone, and his extra pair boots, *and* his shotgun. I began to think quick then, and I lit the lantern and I went out and tracked Flo to Bill Strong's corral, and saw where she'd caught up the two horses and harnessed 'em and hitched 'em to the buckboard and drove west on the road to the Lazy S. I didn't peep to Bill. Didn't want any more scandal if I could help it. So I saddled Dineen's best horse and rode all night. I knew I was right when I picked up Flo's tracks at the Salt Creek crossing two hours after sun-up. But I wasn't sure I'd be in time. I tell you I began to feel more easy in my mind when I saw the buckboard hung on the gatepost. And when I found the shotgun lying out there and saw it hadn't been fired then I was almighty relieved. You don't know, ma'am, what a trial children can be! I declare, what with fallin' into the washpot when they're little, and burnin' powder when they get their growth, they keep a body on the jump

from morning till night. Have you got such a thing as a cup of coffee in the house, ma'am? I'm beginning to feel a little faint."

Aurelian cleared his throat. "I've got somethin' to tell you, Mis' Powers."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEIGHBORS

I

"You won't have any more trouble with Flo, ma'am," said Mrs. Powers, setting her coffee cup on the edge of the table. "She's right reasonable when you explain things to her, and she sees how she was wrong all along and headin' straight for jail when Reely jerked her down. She's askin' you folks as a favor—the good Lord knows she doesn't deserve one either—to keep this business dark. She's been thinkin' it over, and she's afraid, Reely, you'd have to wipe out Dineen if she sicked him on you, and she's delicate about gettin' him killed on her account because of what's first and last only a mistake. If Dineen has got to pass out she'd rather it to be his fault, not hers.

"So she won't say anythin' and hopes you won't. Agreeable? Thanks to both of you. What's that, ma'am? Oh, I'll manage that part. I've handled menfolks all my life, and if I can't explain satisfactory a smashed buckboard and Flo's wearing his clothes to Dineen, I'd feel I was losin' my grip. I'll make a joke of it, trust me.

"Now Jane Strong and those women won't spread themselves any more either, and I'll help 'em explain what they have already spread, too. Folks know me in Rosebud. I used to live there before I married Powers and went up to Three Rivers. I hope you'll like this country, ma'am. One thing"—she moved her head to look out of the window—"you won't be lonesome. Here comes a neighbor. Know him? Ruff Lanigan. Don't look so upset, Reely. You corraled the horses and cleared up the mess of the buckboard, and Flo is out of sight in the other room, so there won't be any questions thought or asked. Just leave

it to Grandma.—Come in, Ruff, come in. You know Mis' Gordon, I guess."

"Why, no, not yet," said black-haired, tall Ruff Lanigan, standing in the doorway, hat in hand, and looking none too well pleased at sight of Mrs. Powers and Aurelian.

"Lemme make you acquainted, Mis' Gordon, with Ruff Lanigan, manager of the Flying H, one of the three big ranches north a ways."

"How do you do, Mr. Lanigan." She did not offer her hand, but, much to Aurelian's disgust, Ruff seized and pumphandled it, anyway.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am. Being a neighbor, kind of, I thought I'd stop in and see if there was anything I could do."

"The woodbox is empty," Mrs. Powers suggested at once. "You might fill it."

"You bet," returned Ruff without enthusiasm and went out.

Mrs. Powers smiled blandly at Mrs. Gordon. "I believe in settin' menfolks to work. Lazy rascals."

"It seems a shame," said Mrs. Gordon, who had certain regulative principles as to what was due a visitor.

"Sakes alive, here's another! I said you wouldn't be lonesome, ma'am. Come in, Charley, and I'll make you acquainted with Mis' Gordon. Charley Quay is the manager of the Box O, another one of the three big outfits north. I see you lathered your horse, Charley. Tryin' to catch up with Ruff, huh?"

Blond Charley Quay, breasting his hat, looked uncomfortably at Mrs. Powers. "Why, no, Mis' Powers, I didn't know Ruff was—uh—comin'. Howdy, Reely. I was passin', Mis' Gordon, and seein' I was a neighbor in a way, I thought I'd stop by and see could I do anything for you."

"That's so very good of you, Mr. Quay, but—"

"You can fill the reservoir, Charley," spoke up Mrs. Powers, who had swung back the lid of the stove reservoir and peered within. "There's a pail."

"Fine, glad to," said Charley Quay, and departed wellward with the pail.

"Really, Mrs. Powers, I don't think—"

"Don't say a word, ma'am. It won't hurt 'em, and after this business of Flo's, you don't want to be bothered with chatterin' menfolks. What you want is rest and quiet, and I'll see you get it. Watch me. Great land o' love, here comes Cal Collins of the Rafter Box. 'Lo, Cal, make your bow to Mis' Gordon, owner of the Lazy S. I see you ran *your* horse into a sweat too."

Cal, having greeted austerely Mrs. Powers and Aurelian, determinedly fixed his brown eyes on Mrs. Gordon. "Being a neighbor, ma'am—"

"And passing by, you dropped in to see what you could do," Mrs. Powers supplied kindly. "The chip basket needs fillin', Cal. Pick up chips now—no chunks so you can get through quicker. You'll have to ask 'em to dinner, ma'am," she added to Mrs. Gordon, when Cal had gone dolefully to labor, "and I expect they'll stay, all right. And they won't— What's that jinglin' and tramplin'? *Cavalry!*"

Young Lieutenant Saunders, knocking politely, was bidden to enter. But it required more than a blue uniform to daunt Mrs. Powers. She barely allowed him to say more than that he happened to be passing, and could he be of any service, when she assured him that he could, and presenting a broom, suggested that he sweep the yard. The lieutenant, his sunburnt nose wrinkling with humor, took the household utensil from her with the air of a guest handling a teacup at an afternoon jangle in the distant East and strode outdoors in a military manner.

They heard his brisk tones: "Sergeant, take this broom and police the yard."

The officer reappeared, and a noncommissioned rasp took up the tale. "Corp'ral, police the yard." Which in turn was naturally succeeded by diminuendo, a two-striper's admonition to one Sullivan to hump himself with that broom and dust the whiskers off the gravel. Mrs. Powers sniffed her contempt for the army trait of letting George do it, and the light of battle lit in her bright blue eye.

The lieutenant was already hastening to manufacture conversation with Mrs. Gordon, who, poor thing, was becoming more and more unstrung with every chatty remark.

"Oh, Lieutenant," cooed Mrs. Powers with dovelike suavity, "your outfit is making such a noise so close to the house. Would you mind taking the bunch out behind the haystacks."

The wretched lieutenant departed perforce. Mrs. Gordon, to Aurelian's annoyance, again felt called upon to remonstrate with the awful old lady. "But there isn't a haystack on the place, Mrs. Powers."

The latter nodded tranquilly. "I know that. Finding what ain't there will puzzle him for a while, and give you a chance to rest up." She rose nimbly and stripped an apron off the hook. "You go in the settin' room and lay down a spell, and I'll throw the chuck together. Everything's in plain sight, and I won't have a bit of trouble. Dearie, don't you see I want to do anything I can to help you? Now you do what I say."

II

"I'd like to know what old Lady Powers was doing at the Lazy S," wondered Charley Quay. "Dineen's mother-in-law. I don't like it."

"You're liable to run onto that old hellion anywhere, like the itch or blackleg," Cal Collins rejoined elegantly, "and everybody knows what she thinks of Dineen. Now

what I'd like to know is what you had to horn in for?"

"Not that it's any of your business, old-timer, but I went down to see what Mis' Gordon looked like," replied blond Charley, straightening his long legs in the stirrups. "And I'm here to remark she tallies better'n I expected. I didn't know they made such girls any more. Now I think of it, what were you doing there yourself?"

"I come along to keep Ruff company."

"Lik'ell you did. You came from the west. I saw you. Ruff, he rode down from the north, like me. I followed his tracks for ten miles. Thought it was you."

"A fine thing, a feller can't go see a lady on business without you got to put in an appearance. I couldn't get a word in edgewise."

"It was agreed that I should handle this deal," said Ruff Lanigan, who had preserved silence since leaving the Lazy S.

"But you weren't handling it," defended Cal Collins. "I asked you last week if you'd seen her. No, you hadn't, and it's the middle of January. I made up my mind last night to take a hand myself."

"You have, and what's it got you?"

"Well, I don't see any sense in wasting time, Ruff, and you've been doing it. We want the Lazy S, been wanting it for years, and we're just about as close to getting it as we were at first. If we'd had Dineen assign the ranch to us soon as he got a clear title, like I wanted, we wouldn't be in this bog."

"Cal, you must have been an only child."

"Why?"

"Because if you'd had brothers and sisters, you couldn't help but have learned some sense. You'd understand the necessity of getting the lady friendly before boarding a bid. Which is why I rode in to-day. I don't mean to make an offer for a month yet, maybe longer. Ain't I told you we couldn't afford to rush this business. It's raw beef,

anyway, and suppose we'd taken title from Dineen at once. How would it look, huh? You can't keep folks asleep all the time. They wake up. Do you want 'em wakin' up and pryin' into our personal business?"

"What do we care whether they wake up or not? We got 'em buffaloed."

"You've got the notion because we're ridin' easy still, in spite of losin' the election, that we can keep on thataway. But if the little fellers ever herd together, you'll see hell a-poppin' in the Basin the way it's been doing on the Pecos. What happened to Murphy? He thought he had folks buffaloed, but he died broke in Santa Fé! What happened to Jeff Jeffries? They used to call him the King of the Cañons. He's buried in one of 'em now. Didn't have enough dinero left to pay for a coffin. The good times can't last, but we can string 'em out if we're careful, and I'm going to see we do. Neither you nor any other damn man is going to spoil my plans or make me change 'em."

"Layin' down the law, ain't you?" Charley Quay queried with a light laugh.

"There's got to be some one to do it, and it might as well be me. If you want to know why, I don't mind tellin' you it's because I'm the only one of us three who's able to keep a level head. Here's Cal, good old bat-headed California, had to jump right in kerplunk without tellin' me what he meant to do. S'pose maybe I hadn't come today and the rest hadn't been there. You'd have made your bid and been stood off. Mis' Gordon is wide as your hat between the eyes, and that kind take some time. Always. Then I'd have come, in maybe a month, and made my offer. She'd get the notion instanter the ranch was worth a mint and price it accordin'. Oh, lovely."

"I'd have told you about it right away, Ruff."

"Yes, you would. Your idea was to put it through yourself and show me up. You'd have kept your mouth shut in case of failure. Oh, I know you, California. You got

a natural itch to run things, and you just can't keep paws off. But you'll keep 'em off hereafter, or you and me will settle it."

"Is that so? You seem to think I'm Four Ace Dineen."

"You were both cut with the same knife," Ruff said swiftly. "I can beat you to it, Cal," he added softly. "You know it."

"If I don't take a chance," Cal said slowly, "don't cuddle the idea you got me scared."

"You're too bullheaded to be scared of anything," Ruff conceded generously.

"You fellers gimme a pain," drawled Charley Quay. "Why lock horns over losin' out on a li'l tinpot ranch? Y'act like a couple of kids."

"We ain't lost the ranch yet," said Ruff Lanigan.

"She may not care to sell." Thus Charley with an oblique glance.

Ruff stared at him with quick interest. "We'll make her."

"I wouldn't do that," growled Charley Quay.

"Singin' a different tune now, ain't you?" rumbled Cal Collins.

"I can tell you the name of the tune," said Ruff Lanigan. "It's Mis' Gordon."

Charley gave him a level look. "What of it?"

"Likewise why not? And come to think of it, I dunno why not. If you marry the girl we can get the ranch for nothin'."

" 'We'?"

"You bet, we. Pardners once, pardners always," Ruff pursued with relish. "Your marriage, if any, won't make a bit of difference to us. Will it, Cal?"

"Hardly. Did you think it would, Charley?"

"We-ell—"

"Thought you saw a chance to glom the outfit for yourself, huh? Was that it?" demanded Ruff.

"I guess I can look after my wife's affairs," Charley declared sturdily.

" 'My wife' already!" exclaimed Cal Collins. "You get this straight, Charley Quay. The Lazy S is to go to Ruff and me, and you are to have half the cattle for your share just as we settled it in the beginning. So you fly at it and court the lady if you want. She might have you, and if she does it'll save us a few thousands. It'll look better too, and that will please Ruff. Yeah. Providential, I call it. But no long engagement. We want the place come spring."

"We'll give you till March first," put in Ruff Lanigan. "That's six weeks. After that I'll whirl my loop."

"If she turns me down, I won't allow any shenanigan with her!" exclaimed Charley hotly.

"You won't allow—" began Cal.

"That's enough, Cal!" Ruff snapped out. "Ain't I told you we were all pardners?"

"But Charley said—"

"And I meant what I said!" that young man insisted truculently.

"Clam down, clam down. Don't fly off the handle that-away. I guess none of us wants to bother a woman."

"See you don't," persisted Charley.

"Leave the fire alone, will you? Time I get it kicked out, you got to relight it. Ain't that a sleeper yonder?"

A yearling heifer butt-ended up from behind a clump of mesquites fifty yards away and stood left broadside on, regarding the horsemen. The Lazy S branded its cattle on the left ribs. This yearling showed no brand.

"Staple fork the right and the left sharpened," observed Charley; adding with unction, "One of your bunch, Cal. Sloppy work, sleeperin'. Thought you trained your boys better."

Oddly enough Cal did not retort in kind. He did not even look at Charley. "No, it ain't any of my stuff. It's two splits the right and the left undersloped. The loose

piece is hanging down behind the ear, and the heifer is holding her head so it looks like my sharp. It's the Lazy S mark all right, but I'll work it over so there won't be any mistake next time. This looks like a good place." He glanced casually at the ridges flanking the draw they were riding through and began to take down his rope.

"What's that there, Charley?" exclaimed Ruff, spurring close to Charley Quay and pointing away to the left.

Instinctively Charley turned to look. Promptly Ruff Lanigan reached across and removed Charley's six-shooter from the holster hanging at his hip. Charley, sensing the light touch, veered back and snatched at his holster a second late.

"Just a li'l precaution," Ruff observed pleasantly, balancing the gun in his left hand. "I noticed your face when Cal went after his rope, and I ain't aiming to have one of my best friends drilled through the liver."

"By Gawd, I'd have stopped him all right!" bawled Charley Quay.

"I expect. Trot right along now. I want to see Cal. Nice work." Dust ballooning over the brush showed where the yearling had met the loop of Cal's rope. "But of course I'll stop Cal, Charley. There really would be no sense in your shooting him when I can straighten it out for you. Let's go."

They spurred to where Cal had busted the yearling and was engaged in hog-tying her while his horse held the rope taut. Ruff rode in front of Charley and checked his mount. "Let's not work that mark over, Cal," said he, dropping his right eyelid in a slow wink. "It might bother Charley." Again the slow wink.

"Well, all right," said Cal equably, and slipped the tie.

"Hustle, Cal! Here comes the mammy!" cried Ruff, as a long-horned red head followed by a red-and-white flank branded Lazy S shot around a mesquite.

Quickly Cal hopped into the saddle and slacked his rope.

The heifer promptly kicked off the loop, bounced to its feet and charged him. So did the maternal reinforcement. Cal's horse dodged both collisions, and the sleeper and its mother galloped off into the brush and over a neighboring ridge.

"All friendly again," said Ruff. "And no harm done. Say, Cal, Jackson told me he saw half-a-dozen Rafter Box cows and yearlings down by the Smith Lake. I'll help you drive 'em back if you like. Comin', Charley?"

"I've seen all I want of you fellers for one while," replied Charley snuffily, and rode away at a lope.

III

"Now what?" Cal said briskly, when Charley had dwindled out of sight and they themselves were a mile on the way to the Smith Lake.

"We'll circle back west and north, round up that yearling and sleeper her proper."

"I'd have enjoyed doing it with Charley lookin' on," grinned Cal, turning his horse.

"I know you would, old-timer," Ruff said sympathetically. "But he might have wondered why you put his mark on it."

"His mark! You're crazy. I was gonna put mine and drive it north."

"I know you were. That's why I stopped you till Charley had drifted. We'll mark it with his mark and leave it here. The Lazy S boys will see it within a few days, before the cuts heal, anyway, and they'll report to Mis' Gordon that the Box O is workin' over her marks. That will nicely put a crimp in his courtin'. I ain't trustin' Mr. Quay any farther than I can throw a range bull by the tail. Once he marries the lady we can whistle for our share."

"I guess maybe."

"You know it. So we'll mark this sleeper and one or two more for good measure if we can find any more."

IV

Ruff and Cal and Charley Quay had not been gone four minutes when a dusty young cavalryman pulled up his leg-weary mount at the Lazy S corral. The private dismounted stiffly, looking about him, swore softly, hitched his slung carbine over his left shoulder and walked toward the ranch house. Aurelian met him at the kitchen door.

"Seen anything of Lieutenant Saunders and his detail, Mister?" queried the soldier, fishing a black plug from his bootleg.

"They're camped round here some place. Yonder's their tracks. What's up?"

"Renegades."

"Renegades! I'll go with you. You won't need the horse. Only a li'l walk. I see their smokes behind that rise."

They found the detail in camp near an arroyo fringing the reverse slope of the rise, and the lieutenant engaged in inspecting his horse's hoofs. He straightened with a twinkle at the approach of the two men and carefully returned the soldier's salute.

"I couldn't find the haystacks, Reely," said he, taking the yellow official envelope proffered by the soldier. "I wonder if I was—uh—meant to find them. However, I believe I've stretched my ground line sufficiently far from the residence. Hello!" He had snicked open the envelope and spread out the sheet it contained on the cuff of his gauntlet. "Those infernal renegades again, just as I've gone into camp for two days' rest! What? Oh, three gentlemen named Red Stick, Long Thunder and Painted Woman killed a rancher over on the Ruidoso, and were

last seen fording the Pecos, headed east. But the commandant is taking no chances. We're to ride to the Ruidoso at once. Yes, I know, Dark Cañon is full of ice and snow, bless ye the Lord. Sergeant O'Brien! Break camp as soon as the men have finished cleaning their firearms. Have you eaten?" he added to the soldier.

"Sir, not yet."

"Take my compliments to Mrs. Powers at the ranch house and tell her you haven't had a bite for three days."

"Sir, but I had my last meal only last night—" objected the soldier, whose moral training as a child had not yet been dulled by a military environment.

"Never mind. Tell her three days. You'll get more that way." He winked at Aurelian as the soldier marched briskly away. "I'll play even with that old lady for sending us out here on a wild-goose chase after those mythical haystacks. You know, Reely, she acted as if she didn't want me to talk to Mrs. Gordon. I wonder why?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. Women are funny folks—sometimes."

"But not Mrs. Gordon. She is one of God's own angels."

"Good Lord, I hope not."

"You know what I mean. Such beauty, such poise, such a *mondaine* manner."

"I think she's got fine manners," objected Aurelian.

"What— Oh, yes, of course. *Mondaine* means precisely that. And all wasted. Pearls before swine. No offense to you, Reely. But this isn't the place for her, now is it?"

"You'd better ask her about that."

"Maybe I will. But imagine asking a woman like that to keep house in Officers' Row at Fort Stanton?"

"I can't imagine it," Aurelian said firmly. "It wouldn't do at all." Lieutenant Saunders gave him a keen look. "You smitten too?"

"I didn't say so."

"Be blind and dumb if you weren't, and you aren't either. Oh, well, it's a dog's life in the Army. No more home than a jackrabbit. What's that trumpeter dragging out of the arroyo?"

"Looks like a saddle."

It was a saddle, as they discovered on joining the trumpeter—a weather-beaten saddle, one that had lain out for several months at least. But it was whole. It had not been a worn saddle when discarded. There were two bullet holes in the low cantle, but these had by no means marred its quondam usefulness.

"Seems to bear. toothmarks," observed the Lieutenant.

"Coyotes," Aurelian said succinctly, faint remembrance stirring in his breast as he eyed the saddle. "Look at the horn. Real Old Mexico tree. Don't see so many nowadays. It ain't any Lazy S saddle. I've seen it somewheres sometime."

"Sir, there's a horse down there," offered the trumpeter, busily going through the saddle pockets. "I got it off it."

Aurelian and the lieutenant peered over the edge of the arroyo. There was a horse, sure enough, even more weather-beaten than the saddle and bearing many, many more toothmarks. Coyotes had gorged themselves on this animal.

"Sir, two of his ribs were busted by a bullet," said the trumpeter.

"Anything in the pockets?" asked the lieutenant.

"Sir, nothin'."

"Then it's no good to you whatever. Saddle my horse and take care to cinch him tight. You know how he blows himself up."

The trumpeter saluted and hastened to obey. The cover of the saddle pocket, which had been turned up partly over the cantle, fell back in place.

"One of those bullets is stickin' out," observed Aurelian, stooping to finger the protruding piece of lead. The

bullet came away at a touch. He picked it up, holding it between thumb and forefinger. "Forty-five caliber. I'm sure wondering what did happen."

"I expect you'll have to take it out in wondering," absently said the lieutenant, who was at the moment considerably more intrigued by the gross injustice of army orders than he was by the discovery of chance lead in an unknown's saddle.

Aurelian carried the saddle with him when he went back to the house, and hung it up in the blacksmith shop. For even weather-beaten saddles are not to be lightly ignored. One never knows when such an article may be of use. Besides, he knew that saddle, must have known the man who'd ridden it, but for the life of him he could not recall the owner's identity. Those bullet holes too. They spelled a gunplay. Somebody had been killed, likely. Both Aurelian and the lieutenant, before leaving the arroyo, had walked its short length from end to end. But they had not found the remains of any human being.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MARKED CATTLE

I

Ruff and his friends were mere dots in the distance when Aurelian came out of the blacksmith shop. They were not making time, and they were keeping together. Aurelian, whose destination lay in the direction they were traveling, resolved to take a few simple precautions. He caught up Tornillo, rode out after his saddle, returned and tied to the corral gate. After which he went into the bunk house, hoping to find that some one had left an extra six shooter. Vain hope. The only firearm in the place was Minnesota's buffalo gun. "It's better than nothing," he muttered with philosophy. "I ain't got time to hunt my six shooter to-day, and I got to have something." So he borrowed the buffalo, an eighteen-pound Sharps, caliber 45–110, a handful of cartridges, and a Winchester saddle scabbard.

The Sharps was too big for the scabbard, but by dropping the point it would do, he decided, passing straps with quick fingers. Going to the kitchen he stuck his head inside the door.

"If you want, Mis' Powers," said he, "I'll hitch the Lazy S buckboard so you can drive in to-night."

"Don't bother, Reely. That girl of mine will ride a team horse bareback, and she'll do that this evening. It will serve her right. There's a moon about ten and we'll do fine. Guess I'll go in and see how Flo's makin' out."

Tactful Mrs. Powers went into the inner room and closed the door. Mrs. Gordon came straight to Aurelian and unaffectedly gave him both her hands. "What can I say, Mr. O'Riley? This time you saved my life, and words

don't seem to fit. You're—you're a wonderful friend."

"I aim to be," said Aurelian, reddening, and dropped her hands in a panic. "The lieutenant says three renegades are scamperin' round over east of the Ruidoso. They might slide back thisaway. Never can tell where renegades will go. But they don't hardly ever bother ranch houses. So I wouldn't take any long rides if I were you. Better stay round the place a lot, I would, until they're caught."

She stared at him with wide eyes. "Do you mean to say there is actually danger from Indians nowadays?"

"I'd tell a man. Why, it wasn't so long ago Hatch's buffalo soldiers locked horns with Victorio's Apaches in Hembrillo Basin and lost most of their horses and a bunch of men. Of course the Mescaleros up on the reservation are all right now, most of 'em. But renegades are bad *hombres* all the time. Yes, *ma'am.*"

There were many of these renegades in the Southwest at that time. They ranged the entire country from the Virgin, San Juan and Cimarron rivers south to Old Mexico, and from the Pecos in the east, across the two territories westward to the Colorado, and sometimes penetrated even farther toward the sunset and killed and robbed on the highways among the California settlements. The Army chased them constantly, but it must be said that the Army never had much luck. Like the coyotes the renegades were constantly on the move, and like the coyotes they never attacked those capable of defending themselves, unless the odds were all in their favor. They rarely annoyed the ranch houses, and it was not their custom to employ firearms when the bow and arrow would serve. The report of firearms attracts attention.

He went on to give her of these facts enough to convince her that the roving red outlaws were a menace not to be ignored. But it must be said that she did not appear in the least frightened.

It was characteristic of the man and of the period that

he did not suggest that she keep one of the boys at the ranch until danger was past. Nor did Peggy. She knew as well as he did that the daily work of the outfit must go on. Besides, short as her sojourn in the region had been, she was learning self-reliance.

"Tell you, I'll fetch over a li'l Winchester saddle gun of mine. Might come in handy."

"But I don't know how to shoot a gun."

"I'll teach you. Meantime and all the time you be careful."

"I'll be careful. Don't worry." She leaned against the doorjamb, fingers linked across the bib of her flowered apron, and looked at him gravely. "'Mister' seems so formal. Would you mind if I called you 'Reely'?"

"Would I mum-mind?" stammered Aurelian, riding the blue on a pink cloud. "Would I mind? Why, ma'am, you can call me anything you like."

She nodded. "My friends call me 'Peggy.'"

"It's a mighty pretty name. It fits you—I mean—" Aurelian, flustered at his own temerity, stammered like a boy.

She laughed. Aurelian thought he had never seen such white teeth. "I'm glad you think it fits. Don't look so fussed. No girl minds being told she's pretty. Why, where's your revolver?"

"I lost it. But I've borrowed Minnesota's Sharps. You might tell him I'll bring it back in a few days."

"Did you lose your gun on the way here?"

"I might have. They hop out of the scabbard sometimes."

She stared wide-eyed. "Knowing you were weaponless, you didn't hesitate to attack what you believed to be an armed and desperate man! Why—why, it is the bravest thing I ever heard of!"

"I guess I'll be goin'." Aurelian, hideously embarrassed, fled.

Peggy Gordon, wonder and something else in her eyes, a tender little smile curving her lips, watched him as he rode away. She saw plumes and shining armor, and courage and high resolve. Then for some reason, she kissed the backs of both her hands.

"He's one good boy," said a voice at her shoulder.

Peggy turned with flaming cheeks. "He's a dear."

Mrs. Powers regarded her shrewdly. "You'd be safe with him."

Although Mrs. Powers was one of those rare people who inspire confidence on short acquaintance, Mrs. Gordon was telling her inmost thoughts to no one. "He lost his revolver on the ride here, and didn't have anything but his bravery when he ran his horse into what he thought was your son-in-law's team."

"Don't say nothin' but his bravery, dearie. Bravery is a whole lot when folks like Reely O'Riley have it."

"I wish I could find his gun for him."

"He'll back-track his trail some time soon."

"All the same, I wish I could find it," persisted Peggy Gordon.

"Oh," Mrs. Powers herself had once been young. "One more cup of coffee and I'll help you look. What's that? Renegades! Come in the kitchen and tell me all about it."

II

"Heading straight from that arroyo," observed Mrs. Powers, squinting. "It ain't possible he jumped it."

They rode on. Peggy indicated the deeply cut hoofmarks at the spot where Tornillo had landed. "Look!"

Mrs. Powers leaned over her saddle horn. "Horse didn't land clean either. His hind hoofs broke away the edge." She glanced interestedly across the arroyo. "See where he took off behind that crack. Must be a long eighteen or

twenty foot across there. Hm-m-m, he took a chance, so he did."

Peggy dismounted, walked to the arroyo's rim and peered down at the cruel blue-gray rocks of the wash. Involuntarily she shuddered. "Thirty feet down and rocks at the bottom. He might have been killed!"

"I expect he was thinkin' that you were the one running that risk," Mrs. Powers observed dryly.

Peggy said nothing except, "That gun might have popped out right here."

"It's certain it didn't drop up to now," said Mrs. Powers, turning her horse across and across the trail. "We ain't overlooked a single place."

Peggy was the one who finally found the six-shooter. It had obviously flown from the holster as Tornillo landed and had fallen into the center of a sagebrush. She picked up the weapon by the well-worn walnut butt, and ran a pink finger tip down the long barrel.

"Know how to unload it?" queried Mrs. Powers.

"I'm going to leave it just as it is." Peggy returned to her horse and put away the six-shooter in a saddle-string pocket.

III

As Aurelian rode eastward on the trail of the three men, his eyes, as a cowman's eyes will, idly and mechanically noted the marks of the hoofs. Two of the horses had circle-shaped nicked hoofs all around, and the third long hind feet. All three animals were barefooted.

Suddenly Aurelian saw that two ridden animals with round hoofs had come from the south and crossed the trail at a right angle. Aurelian leaned down. The round northbound marks were nicked at the edge precisely as were the west bound round-hoofed pair. The same horses had made both sets of prints.

Aurelian rode on.

A mile or two farther, in a wide draw between two ridges, he saw by the tracks and other signs that the men had turned aside into the brush where one of the two on the round-hoofed horses had roped a cow and then loosed her. After which proceedings the horse with the long hind hoofs and the round-footed pair had parted company, the former loping eastward, the latter heading south at a road-gait.

"Now that's an odd number," thought Aurelian. "And I'm almost sure Charley Quay was riding that long-footed horse."

With the cowman's intense interest to investigate a queer occurrence, he rode back to where the tracks going north had crossed the trail and began to follow them through the mesquite.

From the trail the trend of the tracks was northeastward. Aurelian rode through the brush at a jigging trot, the gait of the horses which had made the hoofprints. Where the tracks crossed the point of a low hump their character changed. They were deeply cut and wide apart. Both horses had gone off the high ground at a gallop.

From the top of the hump Aurelian could overlook a wide sweep of country. But the only living things in sight were a grazing cow and a white-faced short yearling, shaking its head at the foot of the hump. Aurelian trotted Tornillo down the slope in the tracks of the galloping horses. The yearling and the cow moved away at his approach.

A hundred yards out from the foot of the slope, Aurelian saw that the tracks indicated that the riders had roped and spilled two animals, had hog-tied one, and then, by the drops of blood in the bunch grass, had earmarked the other.

Aurelian followed the cow tracks from the place of the marking. The prints of the split hoofs led him directly

toward the yearling and cow which were now walking away through the brush. In order not to startle them into a run, Aurelian trotted slowly in pursuit and whistled. The yearling, a heifer, turned broadside on, and turned its head. The white of its face was marred by a streak of red that had run diagonally across the hide.

"Crop and swallowfork the right, and crop and a half undercrop the left," said Aurelian aloud, referring to the earmarks. "Now I'd sure admire to know why they sleepered that heifer with the Box O mark. Lazy S yearling by the brand on the cow. That crop and swallow fork are too deep for a first mark. It doesn't look reasonable to me."

Hence because it did not look reasonable, he continued to follow the tracks of the round-footed horses. Two miles farther on he came to where the riders had operated on another animal. He also found the animal and its mother. The former, a big bull calf, bore on its ears the freshly made mark of the Box O. The latter was branded Lazy S.

Aurelian, hot though he was with rage at this crime against a woman's property, had the sense to ride on cautiously. It is never wise to ride up on any one engaged in sleepering stock not their own. Aurelian was glad that neither Ruff Lanigan nor Cal Collins had carried rifles on their saddles.

Aurelian did not cross the next ridge across which the tracks led. He dismounted on the near slope, tied his horse to a greasewood, took the Sharps off the saddle and went forward on foot to the crest. Here, from behind a spreading sagebush that had retained most of its leaves, he reconnoitered the country before him and picked up without difficulty two horses standing near a tall two-branched soapweed. Only one horse bore a rider. The other man was nowhere in sight.

Suddenly he appeared between two mesquites and

hopped into his saddle. A frantic cow and its offspring also appeared, and charged first one and then the other of the two horsemen.

Aurelian perceived another cow with its progeny a short distance away to the left of the line the two riders were now riding. They too saw the animals and spurred aside with swinging ropes. Aurelian lay down, settled himself comfortably, and raised his rear sight to seven hundred yards. Shoving the long eighteen-pound weapon through the sage-bush he cocked it. "Peggy's sure a pretty name," he muttered, waiting patiently until both men had thrown their loops and the ponies were leaning against the ropes. "A right pretty name," he repeated as he squeezed the trigger. The buffalo gun spat flame with a crash, and a puff of dust showed short of the ropers. Aurelian hastily shoved in another round and elevated his sight to eight hundred yards. Billy Dixon had killed an Indian at twelve hundred in the fight at the 'Dobe Walls, but Aurelian O'Riley was not Billy Dixon. Again the flash and crack. The puff of dust was beyond the two men—two men who had lost all interest in marking cattle.

Aurelian noted with distinct gratification that the black horse of one man had begun to pitch like fury. "Nicked him! That's shootin'!" A third round snapped home. Whang! Another puff of dust. Good line, but over. The pitching pony, after one last tremendous buck, raced away through the brush with his rider and vanished behind the point of a ridge. "Turned loose his rope," muttered Aurelian, identifying the fellow without difficulty, particularly as a keen twinkle of light at the second man's middle indicated that a knife blade was severing his rope, the eye of which, because of the frenzied struggles of the animal in the loop, he was unable to slip over the horn. His rope cut, the second man streaked after the first, spurred on his way by the bullet Aurelian sent whistling after him.

Aurelian reloaded the buffalo gun and continued to wait and watch. It is unwise for one man to pursue too closely a retreating pair in broken country. But in Aurelian's case his horse, after the race of the morning, was not up to any kind of a chase.

After a space of time he saw a horseman topping a distant rise in the northwest. One rider, not two. At least five minutes elapsed before the second man came into sight, riding hard on the trail of the first.

"Now I wonder what kept him so long," muttered Aurelian.

He was to discover the reason presently.

Without haste he withdrew to his horse. As he swung a leg over the cantle he saw two horsemen coming at a run from the direction of the Lazy S. They looked like Minnesota Thompson and Brother George. Aurelian waited. They were George and Minnesota. Aurelian observed that the foreman was packing a Winchester under his leg. George was wearing merely his customary six-shooter.

"We heard Mary Jane talk once," said the foreman, arriving with George on breathless horses, "and we wondered, but when she kept on a-whoopin' we came a-runnin'. Huh? Nope, the women folks didn't hear any shots. They were in the west room with the door shut. What you tanglin' with, Reely?"

"Cal Collins and Ruff Lanigan," replied Aurelian placidly.

To Minnesota it was as though he had casually mentioned assaulting dragons, and the foreman's face showed his amazement. George, knowing his relative of old, grinned widely.

"Pleasure or business?" he drawled.

"Business. No use chasin' them though. Tornillo's too—uh—he's had lots of work lately, and they've got too much of a start by this time. Let's go over the hill."

"Odd number," observed the foreman chattily. "Mis' Powers came to see Mis' Gordon and busted her buckboard to flinders. Brought a ridin' horse to sell the boss. But she ain't buyin'."

"Yeah? I thought you were in Cottonwood," Aurelian said hastily, forbearing to look at his brother who had begun to whistle, *con spirito,* the popular ditty, "He Doesn't Know What He's Talking About."

"We busted both our shovel handles," explained Minnesota. "So I came in myself. If I'd sent Tom or Dick he'd find forty excuses to hang around the kitchen and do chores for Mis' Gordon. If I didn't keep right on their tails continual, I wouldn't get a lick of work done, not a lick. What were Ruff and Cal doin', Reely?"

"Ropin' those two animals yonder you and I are goin' to rope right now, so you can brand and mark it."

George, who had changed his tune, greatly to Aurelian's disgust, to "I Wonder Why She Lied To Me," and was singing it in a night guard bass, remained the observer.

"You couldn't have been close enough to recognize 'em though," said Minnesota Thompson when the cow, a Lazy S animal, and the daughter, a six-months heifer, an *orejana,* lay stretched and hog-tied.

"I recognized 'em," said Aurelian. "Tell you the whole story in a minute." He rode aside to where the two animals had been thrown by the two men. But the ropes Aurelian had expected to find were not there.

"What you looking for?" asked Minnesota.

"Their ropes. Here's where they roped the cows. There weren't any other ropes on the animals when we busted 'em, and that shows they either forefooted 'em or fastened on their hind legs. Naturally the cows kicked the loops off, soon as the boys turned their ends loose. The ropes ought to be right about here. But——" Aurelian spoke with feelings of Helen Blazes— *"Look* at those heel

marks. That's what happened in those few minutes."

Minnesota stared in puzzlement. "What few minutes?"

"The cat has quite a tail. I'll begin where it starts. When I fired at 'em, one of my bullets glanced and hit a horse. Nothing else could have made it pitch the way it did. The fellah riding that horse straightened him out and sloped quick. He didn't cut his rope, and he couldn't have got the knot off the horn if the rope had been knotted, the way the pony was pitchin' and the cow kickin' around like they always do. He must have just dropped it, and that shows he'd been dallying it. The second man cut his rope. I saw the knife blade flash, and he went after the first out of sight behind that point. Pretty soon I saw the first fellah away over yonder, slidin' across a rise. But I didn't see the second fellah come in sight on that rise for a good five minutes.

"See those heel marks comin' and goin'. He came back after those two ropes. Let's follow him. There he goes right around the point. Yep. He tied his horse here out of sight, and I didn't see him sneak back account of the brush. You bet he was huggin' the ground. It's plain enough without the ropes. Who dallies a rope around here besides Cal Collins?"

"Nobody, I guess."

"And Ruff Lanigan is just the boy quick-thinkin' enough to know Cal's rope would give 'em both away, even if he didn't guess the fellah shootin' at 'em was following their tracks. It's a fifty-foot plaited rawhide rope, Cal's rope. Identify it easy. I saw it on his horse at the Lazy S. Ruff might have thought of that too. Besides, Minnesota, Cal was ridin' a black horse and Ruff a gray at the Lazy S. The fellah who dropped his rope, the one who'd been dallying it, rode a black horse. The other forked a gray. Ain't that evidence enough?"

"Cal and Ruff sure enough. But ropin' an *orejana* with a Lazy S mammy is a fool caper. It doesn't look like

Ruff's work or even Cal's. *He* ain't a complete idjit, if he is slow. Still—I wish you'd let 'em mark it, Reely, for evidence like."

"It wasn't necessary. I've been trailing and I found two others they had marked. Both Lazy S sleepers or *orejanas* like this here. One of 'em was a short yearling. There's a third one they've been workin' on off in the brush yonder with its mammy."

"Well, so-and-so and such-and-such!" exclaimed Minnesota in part. "I wouldn't hardly believe it of white men! Makin' trouble for a woman! I'd like to catch 'em at it! But these sleepers are sure an invitation for polecats like that. Of course, Dineen's Mexicans were holdin' down the ranch quite a spell, but that's no excuse for us now. One sleeper now and then will pass, but three is sloppy work. Long-ears nothin'! They were sleepers all right. Damitall, if I've told Tom and Dick once I've told 'em forty times to carry running irons regardless and whenever they find an *orejana* with a Lazy S mamma to brand and mark it right then. We can't afford, I tell 'em, and so did Sam, to wait till round-up any more, not the way rustlers are actin' up nowadays. But nine tenths of the time they go off without a iron, and they're too damn lazy to use a cinch ring, or build 'em a fire in the first place, so they out with their knives and sleeper, sleeper, sleeper. It's bad enough to make a man—" Minnesota Thompson, whetting a knife blade on the toe of his boot, became as eloquent as a mule skinner talking to heaven.

"I'll show you the other three head," said Aurelian.

"But sleeperin' our stock and leavin' 'em right where we'll find 'em!" grunted Minnesota. "It ain't reasonable. But I wonder could we make it stick in court. I hear the new judge is straight."

"He's straight all right, but my story won't sound similar."

"Might be able to hang this riata on to Cal though."

"That wouldn't mean a thing, Minnesota, after I gave my evidence."

"Why not?"

"Wait until you see what you'll see."

"I'll mark and brand this animal," said Minnesota, and kneed down the heifer's neck.

CHAPTER NINE

THE JOHN CROSS

I

A TALL, newly sleepered heifer and its Lazy S mother regarded them solemnly across a crown-of-thorns bush.

"Crop and swallowfork the right and crop and a half undercrop the left," murmured Minnesota Thompson as they jogged past.

"Now wouldn't I look fine layin' my hand on the book and boarding my evidence that Cal Collins and Ruff Lanigan have been workin' over Lazy S sleepers with the Box O mark."

"That's so," regretted Minnesota Thompson.

"Ain't it the truth?" said George. "It's the truth too that the Flying H mark is a split the right and the left underhacked. I've seen some mighty small underhacks too."

"Meanin'?"

"A fair exchange is no robbery."

"But it's the Box O mark, George," objected honest Minnesota, "and Charley, damn his yellow head allasame, didn't put it there."

"Ruff and Cal did, and their stock drift this way a lot," suggested George. "Of course, you couldn't do anything with the Rafter Box mark," he added cynically.

"You're talkin' illegal, George."

"You're talkin' like a Sunday-school superintendent in a moral community," declared George, who had no patience with such sophistry; "and you're a cowman living in a den of thieves."

"But brand-blottin' ain't right, any way you look at it," persisted Minnesota, keeping straightly to the point.

"You want to hobble those scruples. Besides, I didn't say a word about brand-blottin'. I'm speakin' of sleepers and long-ears, weaned stock preferred. Oh, I know how you feel, Minnesota. Once I was a Christian gent like you, and——"

"I ain't a Christian," Minnesota denied with suitable indignation. "I was born on Red River."

"I hear they use their feet in a fight back there, and that's what we've got to do right here. Fight fair if the other fellah will let you, but when he sticks his thumb in your eye you want to gouge out both of his and that will learn him. Of course it's your business, Minnesota; but me, if I had evidence like you got to-day of my stock bein' worked over, I'd collect, and you can stick a pin in that."

"There's more ways than one of collecting," suggested Aurelian, leaning down as though to adjust his stirrup and administering to his brother's leg a painful pinch, "and sleeperin' a debtor's cattle is about the worst there is, bar none. It's usually cheaper in the long run to wipe out the debtor."

"Now there's an idea, Minnesota," George concurred with enthusiasm. "Why not bushwhack Ruff and Cal? Up to now we've been law-abiding, and all we've done is lay up treasures in heaven. I'd a heap rather lay down a few cow thieves in hell."

"That's all right," cut in Aurelian, "but it's got to be an open-and-shut killing with the evidence in plain sight. No bushwhacking. That would fly back on the Lazy S sure, and we don't want that. We've got Peg—Mis' Gordon to consider."

"We've got to protect her interests," declared Minnesota, his expression grimly determined.

"Sure," Aurelian agreed patiently, "but you don't want a range war, Minnesota, not until the evidence is so strong on our side that Bill Jackson and six or seven more of the

li'l fellows would hop right in and string their chips with ours. They wouldn't do it on what we saw to-day. Too complicated for them to see through. Ruff and Cal want us in a row with Charley Quay. But that game is out now. They ain't fools, and they know we ain't. They'll try something else. All we can do is keep our eyes skinned on those two jiggers, and land on 'em first chance. We've got our warning, and that's always an ace in the hole."

" 'We?' " queried Minnesota. "I noticed you used 'our' too, Reely. It ain't your fight."

"All you know about it. I'm right with you from soda to hock."

"Me too," chimed in George. "Only I don't like this hangin' back."

'I wonder have they busted definite with Charley or is it just a blind?" hazarded Minnesota.

"Can't tell you," replied Aurelian. "Cal's a bufflehead, but Ruff's a deep one. If I were you, Minnesota, I wouldn't tell anybody, not even Mis' Gordon, about these sleepers. I'd just beef 'em, and bury the hides."

Minnesota nodded. "I'll do that little thing."

"Hell's bells, Reely!" exclaimed George the impulsive, no longer able to contain himself. "If those sports want a fuss we'll accommodate 'em right now. Don't need to wait for anybody. We could pick a fight with Ruff and Cal in Rosebud and settle the cat-hop pronto. If we let this thing drag along, first thing you know they'll get ambitious and expansive and begin glommin' onto *our* cattle again like they used to. I say remove Ruff and Cal and stay in the cattle business ourselves."

"We'll stay in the cattle business and you're seven jumps ahead of your feet," Aurelian told him tranquilly, aiming a surreptitious kick at George's ankle, which George evaded with a natural dexterity sharpened by the late pinch. *"When* they crowd us, *then* we'll lean on 'em. Not till. It don't ever pay to look like we're doin' the

crowdin'. Let the other fellah do it plenty first, so public opinion will know we're bein' abused and maltreated and picked on generally. Then when we and our friends hop in vigorous and wipe out our rustlers and remove all cattle from their persons, public opinion will say, 'Serve 'em right,' and the honorable court, if any, and it comes to that, will turn us loose without a stain on our characters."

"You think of everything, Reely," was the admiring encomium of Minnesota. "And you're dead right. Huh? Sure, keep Mary Jane as long as you like. Tough luck your six-shooter hoppin' out in the brush yonder. Maybe you'll find it. Where was that second animal they marked? Over yonder? C'mon. Huh? Shot horse in that li'l arroyo? And a saddle with two holes in it? Why, I saw a Old Mexico tree hangin' up in the blacksmith shop when I went in to find me the shovels. That the one? Yeah? I was wonderin' how it got there. I know that saddle."

"Who owned it?"

"Gawd knows, I don't. But I've seen it somewheres."

'So have I, and I can't remember anything else, either. The dead horse was a bay."

"Lots of bays."

"Where'd you bury the fellah, Minnesota?"

"Say, you know, in about a minute I'll begin to get the notion you're tryin' to hang a crime on my pure and virgin soul."

"Leave it to you, George. Doesn't he look suspicious?"

"These Red River boys always look suspicious. I thought it was chilblains—or duck feet. Same as those Injuns around the White Mountain."

"White Mountain! That's the one!" screeched Aurelian.

"Don't mind him, Minnesota," implored George. "He's always had these spells, the poor fellah."

"White Mountain Pete, you ape! When you said White

Mountain, it came to me. That saddle belonged to White Mountain Pete."

Minnesota nodded. "I remember now myself. It's Pete's saddle."

"And Pete was riding a bay when last seen," said Aurelian. "You miss any horses about that time, Minnesota?"

"Not a forelock. He didn't catch up any of our saddle stock when his died on him, and he'd have had use for his saddle if he had. The gall of him, riding right by the ranch."

"Maybe what's left of Pete is near the arroyo somewhere," hazarded George.

"Maybe. He ain't *in* the arroyo. We looked, Saunders and I."

"We've rode past that arroyo forty times since last June," Minnesota said, "and never thought to look over the edge. Guess the wind wasn't blowin' the right way—at first."

"We know now Sam put up a fight," said Aurelian. "Three shots anyhow."

"I guess likely ol' Pete's remainders are layin' out in the brush all right," observed George cheerily.

"And the horse was heading for Pete's corral in Ash Cañon with an empty saddle when he played out and fell in the arroyo," said Aurelian. "Sounds more reasonable thataway. After killin' Sam, Pete would never have ridden so close to Sam's own ranch, not that halfbreed. There's the second one yonder, Minnesota. Ain't he a good-looking young bull, huh? The short yearling's about two mile west. Let's go."

II

"What you want to pinch and kick me for?" demanded George, when he and Aurelian were alone and on their

way to the John Cross. "I wasn't sayin' anything much."

"You were putting ideas into Minnesota's head he's better without. We don't want any promiscuous shootin' around the Lazy S."

"So I noticed."

Something peculiar in his brother's tone drew a sharp look from Aurelian. "What did you notice?"

"Several things—includin' Flo Dineen."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Saw her through the kitchen window, dressed in Four Ace's clothes, gettin' a drink from the pail with one hand and wipin' her eyes with the other. When I went in the kitchen no Flo, only Mis' Gordon and Mis' Powers and Dineen's own shotgun standing in a corner. Know the gun by the bullet hole in the stock Tom Thorn put there time he tried to shoot Dineen. Mis' Powers gave us a long tale of this and that and bustin' the buckboard and all, but she didn't say anythin' about Flo bein' there. So I remembered what happened in Sugar Roebuck's the day before Thanksgiving, and I chucked in what I've heard of Flo's jealousy and added a quart of my own common sense—lend you some of that, Reely—and I guessed the answer. You happen along in time, or Mis' Powers, or what?"

"What for did you come to the Lazy S?" countered Aurelian.

"All my makin's dropped down the well about an hour after you left, so I rode in to borrow some from the Lazy S boys. Anything else you'd like to know?"

"When did Minnesota hit the ranch?"

"About two minutes after I did."

"He see Flo?"

"Not he. Nor the shotgun either. I stood in front of it all the time he was in the kitchen."

"I always said you ought to be half sensible," Aurelian conceded generously.

"You ain't even that or you'd never have left that shotgun there."

"I had a lot to think about at the time," defended Aurelian, and changed the subject promptly with, "anyhow you'd oughtn't to whistled those fool tunes in front of Minnesota. Suppose now he'd recognized 'em. Spoiled everything. What did you do it for?"

"Because he hasn't an ear for music. Didn't you know it?"

"George, it ain't fitting for a younger brother to be so bright. Have I got to take you in hand again?"

"If you do, I'll pat your face with a gun barrel. I've got my growth. Did I guess right about Flo?"

"In a way. Listen—and keep it under your hat—"

III

"You taken a chance," was George's comment. "Good thing Mis' Powers is—Mis' Powers."

"Ain't it the truth? She's one tree-climbin' catawampus, that lady. She'd give a bull first butt and then bat him down."

"You're callin' her Peg now—I heard."

"Who—Mis' Powers?"

"You know who."

"Yeah?"

"Minnesota, he heard too."

"What of it?"

"I thought I'd cured you of that foolishness. You ain't slam-dam serious, Reely, are you?"

"If she'll have me."

"What?" screeched George. "Marry her?"

"If she'll have me."

"I hope *not*. The Drag R is such a happy place."

"It'll keep right on thataway."

George shook a mournful head. "Not if she takes you, Reely. She'll make us shave every day, and change our

shirts regular, and spit outdoors instead of in the stove, and raise hell generally."

"Do you good. Look at you now. Ain't you a specimen?"

"I'm comfortable. I won't be if she comes to the Drag R. Women never let a man be himself. They've got ideas, women have, and they plant 'em in a man like corn in a hill. Take Bill Jackson. He was a good fellah till Sue Tracy roped him. Now she won't let him smoke only in the kitchen, and he has to keep his jug in the blacksmith shop and eat coffee beans after every drink. Why, he's even stopped playin' cards entirely, and cussin' almost, and I did hear she harnesses him up in a b'iled shirt once a month when that travelin' fire escape comes to Rosebud, and yanks him to church. To church! Bill Jackson! Now I ask you friendly, is that any kind of a way to treat a man?"

"It wouldn't hurt either of us to go to church, George," Aurelian said mildly.

"I might hurt the church. I can't sit still in church. I itch."

"Take a bath first."

"Aw shut up! I ain't sayin' another word to save you. Not another word. But allasame you'll be sorry. You don't realize what you're gettin' into. It's a dog's life without bein' able to bite or bark. You'll see. You'll come squallin' to me one of these bright sunshiny days how you wished you'd taken my advice, and I'll sit back and laugh in your face."

"You'll be reformed too, by that time."

"Like'ell I will. No woman's goin' to run me. I settle that right now. If she comes to the Drag R, I'm going to build me a 'dobe up Hembrillo. Unless you go live at the Lazy S," George added hopefully. "Come to think, that would be better. I'd like that. Get me a li'l old boy to help out at the Drag R and—"

"Pig it like gentlemen," Aurelian cut in sarcastically. "You bet, and Gawd help the rustlers!"

IV

"The whole six were nickerin' at the gate this mornin'," said Bill Jackson, standing in the doorway of the John Cross, his latest toddler in his arms. "So I let 'em in. I knew you'd be along. You'll have to hobble 'em awhile, I guess, Reely."

"I had 'em in the horse pasture, but last rain washed out a new arroyo, and they crawled through. Sorry to bothered you, Bill."

"No bother. Light and look at your saddles; eat and spend the night," invited the hospitable Bill, his chin nuzzling the fat neck of the youngster.

"It *is* gettin' toward the end of a hot afternoon," acknowledged Aurelian, wiping his forehead.

"I've got a cure for that," whispered Bill, and put down the child. "Genevieve, run in to your ma. C'mon out to the blacksmith shop, boys."

"What did I tell you, Reely?" George said darkly. "Got your coffee beans ready, Bill?"

"You bet," chuckled Jackson. "I pack 'em right in my breast pocket."

"Coward!" sneered George.

"And proud of it." It was always difficult to get any change out of Jackson, the family man with the pretty wife. He withdrew the corn-cob stopper, passed a mannerly sleeve across the mouth of the jug, and held it out to Aurelian. "Drink hearty."

When the jug had been returned to store and the air was redolent of coffee beans (even George, under pain of eating his chuck behind the woodpile, worked rhythmic jaws), Bill Jackson observed abruptly, "Cahoon is on the prod like a Chihuahua bull in springtime, Reely."

"I expect givin' up his job on the first hurt our ex-sheriff."

"He ain't the only one hurt, but the others are keepin' quiet—so far as I know."

"I take it Cahoon ain't—keepin' quiet."

"He was shootin' off his mouth in the Silver night before last. I was in there gettin' my jug filled, and I waited. He was pretty rank. Four Ace Dineen was buyin' him drinks and egging him on."

"Oh, Dineen. Yeah, it would be Dineen. I expect he figures it would save him trouble if Cahoon was lucky."

"I hadn't heard," said Jackson woodenly.

"I expect I'd better go in town to-night, Bill," said Aurelian. "We'll eat with you though."

"You'll find him in the Silver likely—mighty well corned by midnight. Silver Sam told me the two of 'em have been at it thisaway ever since New Year's."

"I'll call early. Rather see him sober. Will you lend me a six-shooter, Bill?'

CHAPTER TEN

THE SILVER SALOON

I

TEN yards from the road a rusty tin can stood upright under a soapweed. Aurelian drew Bill Jackson's six-shooter. "Might as well try her out." Whereupon the gun muzzle spat orange flame, and his arm was wreathed in smoke. The can leaped and rolled and clattered dismally. "Shoots a little coarse," observed Aurelian, ejecting five spent shells and reloading carefully. "But she holds a good line. Remember, George, this is my job. Don't you go hornin' in—unless you have to."

"Leave it to me," said Brother George.

They rode on silently, while the sun set behind the San Andreas, and the shadows filled the draws like water, and the Sierra Blanca, in its mantle of snow, glowed coral, a coral that slowly deepened to strawberry, to old rose, to tenderest orchid. The orchid died, leaving the great mountain cold and white with the austere loveliness of a beautiful nun. Night had come.

But night in Rosebud had not the soothing calm of the brooding heights outside its doors. It was garish, raucous; it shouted to the moon, and it was in full blast when the two brothers rode in on a discreet cow trail laid down among the washed-out ruins of Mexican houses. This unobtrusive entry was purposeful. Cahoon had friends, and advertisement of their presence would have been unwise.

> "Jimmy-John-Joe he rode a white horse,
> Rode a white horse, rode a white horse,
> Jimmy-John-Joe he rode a white horse,
> All the wa—a—ay from Lincoln."

Close harmony by three whisky tenors and a lager-beer bass was hurling its vibrations across the stage company's wagon yard as they tied their horses to the wheels of a played-out wagon behind it. "The boys are sure in tune this evenin'," said Aurelian, glancing first in one direction and then in another. "No light in either Cahoon's or Dineen's. We'll try the Silver. I don't know when I've seen it so warm at night in January," he added thoughtfully.

"It'll chill up to-morrow likely," opined George, following his brother between stacks of mesquite roots toward the glowing windows of the Silver Saloon.

Taking extreme care that they were not themselves seen, they reconnoitered through the glass both the small back room where four business-like and quiet games were in progress and the large front room with the bar running its entire length, that was noisy with thirsty guests. But neither Four Ace nor the ex-sheriff was visible in either room.

"We'll wait around," said Aurelian. "No sense in rushing things."

They retraced their steps and squatted down on their heels in the inky darkness between the high fence of the wagon yard and the black adobe wall of a warehouse. There they could see nearly the whole length and breadth of Main Street, its sidewalks and its saloons, and yet were not likely to be themselves remarked by any eye, either good or evil.

The lamplight from shadeless windows splashed in yellow rectangles the dust of Main Street. A freighter, overserved with liquor, straddle-legged down the middle of the thoroughfare, his whip cracking like pistol shots, and bawled instructions to imaginary mules. Another gentleman, in somewhat worse condition, was being put to bed in the hotel watering trough by two solicitous friends, while painted ladies domiciled in the adjacent dance hall

thrust powdered shoulders from fortuitous windows and shrieked encouragement. A bottle crashed through a front window of the Wild Rose Saloon. Glass cascaded tinklingly. A man shot headfirst after the bottle, taking with him the remainder of the glass, and sprawled among whisky kegs. The huge form of the Wild Rose bartender became visible for a moment on the doorstep, slapping dust from his palms.

"Good fellah, our Tommy," observed George, alluding to the bartender. "He don't hardly ever hurt a drunk that gets gayful. Just throws him out and lets it go at that. That's the way to keep custom. They appreciate kind treatment."

Aurelian eyed with interest the fallen man. He thought he knew him. The man sat up. He did know him. It was Brazil Sharp, one of Dineen's lookouts.

"Guess Four Ace is neglecting his business to attend to mine, all right," whispered Aurelian. "If Brazil only decides to sleep it off on our side of the street, I'll ask him where Dineen is."

Brazil felt of his head, he felt of his arms and legs. Then he lurched to his feet, clasped a whisky keg to his bosom, and staggered into the alley between the Wild Rose and a private house.

"There's a pile of *frijole* hulls behind that house," said George. "I noticed. Bet that's where he's headin'."

Aurelian rose to his feet. "We'll see."

Reclining against the hull pile, still embracing the whisky keg, his lips pressed to the bunghole, they found the lookout sound asleep. The whisky keg boomed a solemn accompaniment to his stertorous breathing.

Aurelian, his back to the street, knelt down and shook him vigorously. Brazil clung the tighter to his whisky keg and rumbled incoherently into it. George firmly unhooked his arms and removed the keg. Brazil sat up and frankly wept.

"My whisky keg!" he wailed heart-brokenly. "Where-sh my whisky keg?"

"You can have it back if you're a good boy and answer Uncle's questions," Aurelian assured him kindly in a voice whose manufactured hoarseness he quickly perceived was unnecessary. "Where is Four Ace Dineen?"

The question wrought an immediate metamorphosis in both the physical and mental attitude of Brazil Sharp. He hopped to his feet with the agility of a bounding kangaroo, and waved his arms like an orator. "He thu-throwed me out," he vociferated loudly. "Jusht fuf-for tut-takin' a lul-li'l drink. He dud-drinks himshelf, he—Blub! Blub! Skwlks!"

"Grab his feet, George," said Aurelian, the palm of his hand against Brazil's mouth, a hard forearm under his chin. "We'll take him down in the wash."

Their struggling burden subsided and began to snore before they had made their stumbling way to the bank of the wash. They rolled Brazil without ceremony down the bank, straightened him out and sat upon his legs. Brazil awoke and squirmed uselessly. "Pup-paralyzed!" he moaned. "Cuc-can't move my fuf-feet."

Aurelian leaned forward and blew violently into an ear. "Wu-wind's shush-shore high to-night," muttered Brazil.

"Dineen's a damn scoundrel," said Aurelian, falling in with the spirit of the occasion. "Have you seen him around, Brazil?"

"Dud-Dineen's a —— —— ——!" Brazil declared with startling profanity. "He fuf-fired me."

"Have you seen him?" Aurelian persisted patiently.

"Huh-him and Ca-Cahoon are trailing tut-together," mumbled Brazil. "They gug-got it in fuf-for Rur-reely O'Riley. I heard 'em. Rur-reely's a friend of mine."

"What could be sweeter?" murmured George.

"And I only bought him a drink twice," said Aurelian.

"It pays to be kind to dumb animals. Stick the point

of your knife in this one, Reely. He's run down."

Aurelian contented himself with a mere shake that made Brazil's teeth rattle like dice in a box. "What did Dineen and Cahoon say, Brazil?"

"Gug-gonna catch hu-him in shaloon. Ca-Cahoon's gug-gonna talk fuf-friendly—at—at fuf-first, then ar-r-rgue. Thu-then Dud-Dineen's gug-gonna gra-grab Rur-reely's huh-hand and Jaw-jawn'll shush-shoot him. Dud-damn shush-shame. I lul-like Rur-reely. I'd lul-like tell him, bub-but whu-when I'm sober I'm 'fraid Dud-Dineen'll kuk-kill me if I tut-tell him, and whu-when I'm dud-drunk enough tut-to tell him I dud-don' shee Rur-reely. It's a shtand-off."

"Does Dineen know you overheard him?" Aurelian inquired gently.

"He dud-dunno for shure. 'F he wash shure he'd kuk-kill me shure."

"Have you seen Dineen and Cahoon to-night, Brazil?" pursued Aurelian, prodding ribs with hard knuckles.

"I shee 'em gug-go in Mum-monaker's huh-house."

"Monaker. Yeah. It would be." Thus George in a delighted whisper. Steve Monaker, the ex-county clerk, was one of the disgruntled. "I hope he's in this up to his hocks. Outside of his being an all-around scaly scoundrel, I never had any use for him since he cheated me out of the bounty on four wolf scalps last year. You remember, Reely."

Aurelian nodded. "I don't think you'll have any chance to get hunk with Monaker. Our Stevie ain't the kind to run risks with his hide, but maybe we can think up something. I expect we might as well rise and shine. Brazil has told us all we need to know. Say, you get his whisky keg, will you, George. I want him to stay quiet until we get back."

"Clever cuss, Dineen," said George, when he had rolled the object of Brazil's affections down the bank and Aurelian was returning the beloved to the embrace of the

drunken. "You'd think there was whisky in that keg the way Brazil laps at it."

II

The hands of the clock on the wall above the Silver bar pointed to ten post meridian when Cahoon and Dineen entered the saloon. In their wake strolled unconcernedly former County Clerk Monaker, ex-County Treasurer Wryneck, and ex-County Attorney Roaring Jack Shillaber. These three did not belly the bar in company with the coarser element, the erstwhile sheriff and the gambler. They took their drinks to a table in a corner where they held urbane conference in whispers, sipping their liquor delicately, in the manner befitting great men.

"Say what you like," growled Cahoon, yellow mustache lifting to spit tobacco juice between stained teeth, "Reely O'Riley's due for his come-uppance."

"You're the boy to hand it to him," Dineen said earnestly. "Reely's been takin' up lots of room lately."

"He'll take up less when I'm through with him."

"That's the talk. Don't let him run over you, Jawn."

"I'll kill the ————!" bumbled Cahoon.

It was noticeable that there was an open space of at least ten feet on each side of the two talkative citizens who had taken post about the middle of the long bar. Customers in crowded groups were absorbing their bracers at both extremities of the refreshment counter. This to the annoyance of Silver Sam, who was walking himself bow-legged in the effort of serving both ends against the middle. It may be said that, apart from Cahoon and his friend, and the three notables at the corner table, there was little conversation among the assembled guests. They were too busy listening.

Dineen drew back from the ex-sheriff in order to fill his glass.

"I'll make him dance," rolled on Cahoon. "No —— —— —— —— can make a monkey out of me and get away with it!"

He raised his glass to his lips, but not a spoonful of the red liquor was he destined to drink. "Hands up, Cahoon!" came the command in the only too familiar voice of Aurelian O'Riley, speaking from a point directly behind him.

Immediately Cahoon's arms shot ceiling-ward, the whisky glass smashed against a rafter, and Silver Sam, who was unfortunate enough to be passing behind the bar at the moment, received in his ear a whole mouthful of whisky that Cahoon, in his excitement, blew straight to his front.

"No cards, Dineen," cautioned brother George, who had glided to a most advantageous position at the gambler's left hand. "Keep your hands flat on the bar."

"Stand right still, Cahoon," went on Aurelian. "Don't look around either. Keep your eyes on the pretty bird, Cahoots. You'll lemme call you Cahoots, won't you? You're such a helpful cuss, always dipping in on every li'l deal—Cahoots kind of fits."

"You gimme an even break, and I'll show you!" snarled Cahoon. "Gimme a chance."

"Turn your bull loose any time," offered Aurelian. "There ain't any ropes on you that I can see."

"What can I do with a gun in my ribs? Do you think I'm a fool?"

"I think you have a powerful imagination."

At this those customers at the ends of the bar who were antipathetic to Cahoon and his politics, smiled more or less covertly. Not too openly, of course, because that would have been dangerous as well as in bad taste. The three at the conference table, however, were markedly and frowningly silent.

"Damn you, O'Riley—"

Something prodded Cahoon into silence. "Let's slip

the cinch on rough talk, Cahoots. I heard you talking serious about me just now. You jokin', weren't you?"

"Take your gun away, and I'll show you!"

"You said that before, but I guess I'll leave the gun where it is."

Whereupon the covert smiles and other evidences of ill-concealed amusement were again displayed. Dineen's hands quivered where they rested palms down upon the bar. Brother George nudged him with a boot toe. "No, Dineen, no."

Dineen made an indescribable sound in his throat. Aurelian crowded in close to Cahoon. "Turn to your left —slow, Cahoots. I'm right behind you."

The ex-sheriff obeyed, and showed a purple countenance to the assembly—a purple countenance that shaded to blue at the gills, and was shot with white streaks and blotches of an unhealthy appearance. It may be said that Cahoon was in a toss. The drink was dying out in him a little. He was trembling like an over-ridden horse.

"Walk slow across to the table where Wryneck, Shillaber and Monaker are sitting so pretty," was Aurelian's next command.

Cahoon, his hands still above his head, was meticulous in compliance with Aurelian's behest. He knew what he would have done in the same case to any one who had made threats against his own life. He expected no milder treatment from Aurelian. It was merely a question of when the end would come. Cahoon had courage of a sort, but it was not the tough, forged-steel kind that can endure with fortitude the ordeal of suspense. His eyes, glaring with loathing for his present ridiculous situation, and with deadly malice toward the man who had thrust him into it, noted abstractedly that Shillaber was making faces at him—making faces and winking.

"Got the face-ache, Roaring Jack?" Aurelian queried softly across the shoulder of Cahoon.

Shillaber smoothed his expressive features instantly, and smiled a crooked smile. Wryneck and Monaker twisted slightly in their chairs. They did not know what was coming, and like all men whose consciences are not clear, they feared the worst.

"Stop now, Cahoots," said Aurelian, when Cahoon was a yard from the conference table. "Here's a friend of yours, boys," he added to the address of the trio. "Cahoots Cahoon, ex-sheriff of Rosebud. He doesn't seem able to play the cards you dealt him, does he?"

"What are you talking about, O'Riley?" demanded Shillaber, the bull-necked red-faced man, not a coward, but more at home in a battle of words before the bench, than in a saloon confronted by a cow-person who bore the reputation of being utterly careless of consequences. "What are you talking about?" he repeated.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," was the drawling reply, "only next time you pick a dog to sic on me, you'll have better luck maybe if you choose a clean-strain animal. Here, take your yellow pup."

So saying Aurelian seized Cahoon by the nape of his neck and the slack of his breeches and, putting forth all his strength, flanked him as he would have flanked a calf, and hurled him horizontally across the table. The flying body of Cahoon cut down the three men as the sickle reaps the wheat. Missile and targets sprawled on the floor in a mess of thrashing arms and legs. The table in some manner turned itself over on top of them.

Aurelian stood back and watched the amusing scene with glinting eyes. Not once, since entering the Silver Saloon with his brother, had he drawn his gun.

III

Nor did he draw it now. Hands hanging loosely at his sides he remained the observant spectator.

The heaving tangle on the floor resolved itself into its component parts. Three of the four parts sat upon their haunches and stared at Aurelian in perplexed rage. What had occurred was not according to precedent. As previously they had not quite known what to expect, now they did not quite know what to do. If one of them alone had been flailed down, he would doubtless have acted. As it was each waited for some one else to force the issue.

Cahoon however did not stay on the floor. He scrambled to his feet and stood swaying, his blood-hot gaze seeking out Aurelian. The latter nodded. "Awright, let 'er go."

Cahoon hesitated, his right hand fumbling foolishly at his gun-butt, but he did not pull the weapon. Aurelian's hands still hung at his sides. His eyes held Cahoon's eyes in a fascinated stare. Cahoon blinked, but he could not look away. His eyes opened wide and narrowed alternately. The pulsing of the lids was almost regular. Still he made no move to draw his gun.

The three men continued to sit on the floor in frozen and innocuous immobility.

Aurelian strode forward. The overturned table was in his way. He kicked it nonchalantly into Monaker, and strode on to confront the victim of hesitation in the rear.

"Cahoots, you don't dare pull that gun," said he in a conventional tone. "Your nerve's gone. You haven't any left, you jackrabbit."

So saying, Aurelian cuffed him with both hands. The ex-sheriff's head rolled from side to side. He raised his hands to guard his ears. Aurelian, too disgusted to continue the exhibition, took him by the shoulders, ran him to the door, poised him on the threshhold, and kicked him out into the night.

Aurelian turned back to the bar. "All right, George," he said. "Your turn, Dineen," he added pointedly.

"Now I'd like to know what you're hornin' at me for,

Reely," said Dineen in the peevish tone of one who does not in the least comprehend why he is being picked on. "Is this your night out, or somethin'?"

"Oh," said Aurelian, "that's it, is it? No hard feelin's against me—or George?"

"Absolutely not. Why, Reely, I'd be glad to have you and George drink with me."

"I ain't thirsty," denied Aurelian, George adding his, "Me either."

The gambler shrugged indifferent shoulders. "Suit yourselves." He turned to the audience and waved a friendly hand. "All promenade to the bar. Everybody drink."

Aurelian jerked his head toward the door. "Let's go, George." Having a healthy regard for possible prejudice, George made his withdrawal backward. Aurelian sidled out, a cold eye watching every move of the three conferees who had been bounced from their pedestals and were at last getting to their feet and belatedly striving to claw about themselves the rags and tatters of their shattered dignity.

George was waiting for Aurelian on the sidewalk. "Ol' Jawn seems to have vanished," Aurelian observed brightly.

"Let's us do the same," rejoined his brother. "Which I'm never so glad to get out of any place alive in all my life. If I hadn't promised you not to draw my gun unless necessary—"

"You didn't need to, did you?"

"Well, it was a fool caper, anyway," complained George. "I told you so in the beginning. How did you know Cahoon would take it thataway?"

"I knew Cahoon."

"You didn't know what Dineen and the other three would do."

"A fellah has to take *some* chances, George."

George grunted his disapproval. "I like to got cross-eyed tryin' to watch them and Dineen at the same time. You ought to told me beforehand you were goin' to jerk 'em down."

"I didn't know I was goin' to until I did. It just came to me, spur of the moment like. Guess now you're square with Monaker for those wolf scalps. Down this way, George. It's shorter than going by way of the Wild Rose."

When they reached the wash wherein they had left Brazil Sharp, they found him snoring, the whisky keg still clasped in his arms.

"You stay with him, while I go fix things up. Head looks about your size, George. Seven and a quarter ought to be about right. Yeah, I'll take care of our horses."

Aurelian, peace in his heart and a feeling of general well-being permeating his entire person, climbed the bank.

On Main Street sidewalk the three whisky tenors and the lager-beer bass were still singing "Jimmy-John-Joe."

IV

"Never drawed his gun!" remarked a bow-legged customer, slopping his glass in excitement. "Bluffed him from soda to hock!"

"Bluffed all four, you mean, Sam," the town blacksmith corrected him.

"All five—with George's help, Timbo," elaborated Ruidoso Red. "And did you notice George didn't pull his iron, either."

"There'll be irons pulled over this," the bow-legged man declared, glancing toward Dineen, who, with various friends, had moved to the other end of the bar. "Dineen ain't Cahoon. He mostly aims to finish what he starts, and it's aces to deuces he ain't forgot what happened at Sugar Roebuck's. He is playing for time now, like Roaring Jack and the other two. You'll see."

"Think so?" There was a slight scorn for the other's lack of perspicacity in the cool blue eye of Ruidoso Red. "I ain't so sure myself. Reely and George are a pair to draw to. For cold-drawed nerve they're the pure quill, both. This country needs boys like that."

This was sedition. The bow-legged one caught the baleful stare of a couple of Monaker-Wryneck-Shillaber adherents and withdrew from the vicinity of Ruidoso Red. Ruidoso also caught the stare, but he was not of the meek who shall inherit the earth. Stiff in his conceit, he stared back truculently. The adherents, none other than our old acquaintances, the election officials, gross Fat and skinny Sim, thought well to look away, and in a little, to leave the premises as unobtrusively as possible.

"Allasame, this won't be the last of it," said Timbo the blacksmith, a gentleman constructed of sterner stuff than the bow-legged citizen. "They can't swallow that sort of guff *all* the time."

"They can object," admitted Ruidoso Red. "But I'm gamblin' Reely O'Riley's the boy to show 'em where to head in. He just ain't takin' nothin' off nobody." Ruidoso Red and Timbo the blacksmith drank to this sentiment and went out together.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONSEQUENCES

I

"WHO's there?"

"Reely O'Riley, Sugar. Want to do a li'l tradin'."

"At this time of night! I just got to sleep. Wait till mornin', can't you?"

"If I could do that I wouldn't be wakin' you up now. I want a saddle quick and right away."

Sugar Roebuck did not sell a saddle every day. Reflecting blithely that his cheapest saddle sold for forty dollars, upon which the profit was fifty per cent., he withdrew his head from the open window, stuffed the tail of his nightshirt into his trousers, slipped on a pair of shoes, and took down the keys from the nail on the bedpost.

A few belated revelers were still infesting Main Street. Most of them had joined the hard-working quartette and were making Rosebud ring with

> "Johnny Morgan played the organ,
> The father banged the drum,
> The sister beat the tambourine,
> The brother went pom, pom, pom, pom!"

"Beats me how they keep it up and keep it up," grinned Aurelian hurrying along beside the pattering Sugar.

"Sounds like cats to me," said Sugar, who drew a mean and rosined bow. "Want a bridle too, and a blanket?"

"The whole outfit," amplified Aurelian, "including the horse. You know one for sale?"

"Got one myself. Strong pony, got him in a trade from a freightin' outfit."

"Then he's been worked. Ought to be fit to go a long ways."

"He's in good shape. I'll take thirty."

"You mean you're askin' thirty, but you'll throw him in for nothin' if I buy a quirt and a pair of spurs, and a gun and some ammunition, huh?"

Sugar, his key in the lock, considered. "Go you," said he, and turned the key. "Have a light in two shakes. Got the very gun you want, too. Forty-five Colt, five and half inch barrel, ivory butt plates, fine working condition."

"Secondhand, huh? Rifling worn smooth, more take-up in the trigger than there is in a long latigo."

"Nothing like that," denied Sugar, reaching into a showcase and producing the weapon. "Even the blueing ain't worn to speak of. Hold it close under the lamp and look at it good."

Aurelian withdrew the cylinder pin, removed the cylinder, stuck a piece of paper into the frame, and looked through the muzzle. Sugar had told the truth. The rifling was in factory condition. Not a pit or speck of rust marred the shining beauty of the barrel. Aurelian replaced the cylinder, shoved home the cylinder pin, cocked and uncocked the hammer, and fanned the gun.

"I never was able to do that," Sugar observed admiringly. "You like it, I see. I'll take forty dollars."

"You don't see, and you'll take twenty. Action's a li'l stiff, and I'll have to do a lot of work on it with oil and a file before she's good for much."

"You will like fun and the action is smooth as butter. Seein' as you want it so bad, and bein' a friend an' all, I'll take thirty-eight, and not a dime less."

"Twenty," Aurelian insisted firmly. "It ain't for me, anyhow."

"Thirty-five, Reely. Hell's bells! Don't you want me to make any profit a-tall?"

"Profit! You got it for ten likely. Who? A Mexican.

Then you got it for five. I know you, y' old post-trader. If you don't make two hundred per cent. on everything, you think you're being robbed. I'll give you twenty-two six bits."

Sugar called upon the gods to witness that he was a poor man and his good nature would be the ruination of him, and thirty-two four bits was positively his last and lowest price. Aurelian, stout fellow, finally obtained the weapon and a box of ammunition for twenty-five dollars. Aurelian stuffed the gun into his waistband, the ammunition into a trousers pocket, and girded himself for renewed conflict with Sugar Roebuck.

II

He departed, lugging the majority of his purchases in a sack, and wearing the hat superimposed upon his own. As he turned up the street, two shadows took shape in the darkness. Aurelian made a movement.

"It's me, Timbo," the shorter shadow hastily declared himself. "We've been waiting for you, Reely."

Aurelian replaced his six-shooter. "Howdy, Ruidoso. Howdy, Timbo. What's new?"

"Four Ace Dineen is organized with a Winchester and prowlin' round town. We thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks," said Aurelian. "I'll have to see can I keep out of his way."

"I'll bet that's what he will do—not," murmured Timbo the blacksmith, as the sound of Aurelian's bootheels died out between the buildings. "I wonder why is he wearing two hats?"

"Maybe he's in disguise," suggested Ruidoso Red. "Let's prowl round too and see him shoot Dineen."

III

When the morning bright rode down the dark, and the

sunshine lay in long windrows between the shadows of the eastern peaks, Brazil Sharp awoke and sat up beside his whisky keg, working his lips, for the taste in his mouth was unpleasant. His aching eyes stared at the whisky keg. "My Lawd!" he remarked in awed tones, "What a good time I must have had! Wonder did I drink it all." He tilted the keg and applied his mouth to the bunghole. Not a drop rewarded his efforts. Dispiritedly he rolled the keg to one side. "No wonder I got a head." He rubbed the head in question tenderly, and added, "It's a record—a whole keg. I didn't know I could do it. What is that horse doin' there?"

"That's your horse," said a voice behind him.

The startled Brazil, his jangled nerves throbbing with exquisite pangs similar to those of a severe toothache, jumped like a jackrabbit, and beheld, sitting side by side on two small boulders, Aurelian O'Riley and his brother George.

"Wha—wha—" began Brazil.

"Here's a hat too," Aurelian tossed him the headgear. "See if it fits."

Stupidly, for he did not understand, Brazil tried on the headgear. "Li'l big."

"Stick your ears inside, and it'll fit," advised Aurelian. "You got your hat, your horse, and there's some jerky and beans in that sack tied on your cantle. You'll need 'em before you hit El Paso."

"El Paso! What for I want to go to El Paso?"

"Dineen is looking for you."

"Din—why—what—"

"Last night you talked in your sleep."

Fright showed in Brazil's eyes. "I—I must have been drunk."

"It's possible. Anyway, I'm giving you that outfit. You drag it. Oh, wait a shake. Here's a gun."

Brazil Sharp drew away from the six-shooter in dis-

taste. "I got no use for a gun. What little shootin' I need to do, I always use a knife. Well, I'll be goin'. I—you know I must have been *damned* drunk."

Aurelian and George went to the hotel corral, whither Aurelian had taken the horses, caught up their mounts and posted themselves behind the warehouse where they could watch the long and dwindling streak that was the main road to El Paso.

Brazil Sharp and his horse were a dot in the distance when the sound of galloping hoofs on Main Street split the silent morning. "I thought so," murmured Aurelian. "I'll attend to it, George."

Dineen, mounted on his best horse, shot past the warehouse like a bullet from a gun. He looked neither to right nor left. His eyes were clamped on that distant speck traveling south. Aurelian hung his spurs in the entirely rested Tornillo and drew level with the hindquarters of Dineen's horse in ten jumps. Dineen, his attention riveted on his prey, his brain absorbed in the pleasing thought of what he would do to that prey when he caught it, had not the slightest hint of impending doom until his startled eye perceived Tornillo's long bay head drawing level with his elbow.

It was at this precise juncture, before Dineen could make a move, that Aurelian reached down, snatched the end of the streaming tail of Dineen's mount, wrapped it round his saddle horn, and spurred to the right, thus spilling in one grand cataclysmal smash, Dineen and his horse and his Winchester all over the place.

The horse scrambled to its outraged hoofs and galloped wildly away. Dineen lay in a heap, his right leg doubled backward beneath the left. Aurelian pulled up. Dineen continued to lie still. Aurelian dismounted. George had already done so. They were almost immediately joined by Sheriff Maxwell, who lived near by. Shotgun Maxwell had evidently but recently finished the morning meal, be-

cause he was still picking his teeth. He continued to work the toothpick as he bent to turn over Dineen.

The gambler was unconscious, but breathing well. "Busted his leg, I see," said the sheriff.

"He was chasing a friend of mine," explained Aurelian.

"Was that it? I thought it was only another one of your jokes."

Ruidoso Red and Timbo the blacksmith materialized from nowhere and promptly, if mistakenly, took Aurelian's part.

"I saw the whole fraycas," declared Ruidoso Red. "Dineen shot first."

"Sure did," blandly corroborated Timbo, with a face as straight as one of his own wheelspokes. "Reely just naturally had to kill him. What you all laughin' at? Huh? Well, now that's odd. I'd have swore I heard shootin'. How aboutcha, Red?"

"You bet. Sounded to me like a regular battle. Looked like one too," he added hastily, in view of his opening remark.

The sheriff grinned. "You know what they say, boys: There are liars, damn liars, and expert witnesses. Let's all go over to my place and have our morning smile. Got me a full jug last night. C'mon."

"Hey!" cried Dineen, emerging with a wriggle from the unconscious state, "goin' to leave me here in the sun? My —my leg's busted."

The five turned their faces back to duty. "I suppose we ought to pack him home," said the sheriff. "I thought he'd stay senseless quite a spell, until somebody else came along anyhow. Easy now, boys."

IV

"Here's your gun, Bill. Much obliged."

Bill Jackson nodded. "Ruidoso said you didn't need it

much. I'm only sorry you didn't down both of 'em. See you got a fancy piece of artillery now."

"Yeah, it's a secondhand outfit I got from Sugar Roebuck."

"Looks like one Ruff Lanigan used to own. Yeah, it was Ruff's gun, all right. Know it by that yellow streak across the middle of the ivory butt-plate."

"Ruff's gun, eh? Sugar said he got it off a Mexican. Must be a mistake, Bill."

"Maybe so, but my eyes are fair, considerin'. Stay a while."

"Can't, Bill. Got to haze those horses back. In the corral, are they?"

They drove by way of the arroyo big Tornillo had jumped, in order that Aurelian might make a search for his gun. Halfway out from town it blew up a rainstorm out of the west, a howling windy thing that drenched them in sixty seconds. Then the storm fled away eastward as suddenly as it came, the sun appeared, and they steamed in itching discomfort.

At long last they reached the arroyo, now naturally bank full with a roaring river of yellow water. Aurelian had expected to locate the place of the leap by the tracks. He had been at the time in too much of a hurry to note landmarks. But the heavy rain had smoothed out every print, both those of Tornillo and the others made by the shoes of the two women. Aurelian, swearing heartily at a downpour that he would otherwise have welcomed with a thankful heart, rode by the very bush beneath which Peggy had found his six-shooter and passed on unknowing.

"No sense in hunting now," Aurelian said in disgust. "Might as well get home as quick as we can. I'll try out this ivory-handled outfit soon as we hit the ranch, and if she's any account I'll keep her."

"Try her out now," suggested George.

"And stampede every one of this light-headed bunch! Ain't you had exercise enough for one day?"

"There's likely something wrong with the gun," George said, changing the subject hastily. "Ruff wouldn't have parted with it otherwise. Unless the Mexican stole it."

"I'll ask Ruff when I see him. I'll keep it till then, if she's good."

She *was* good. The ivory-handled six-shooter shot as true as the gun Aurelian had lost. Thereafter he wore it for his personal weapon, until such time as Lanigan might ask for its return. Oh, undoubtedly the Mexican had stolen it. No man in his senses would willingly have parted with such a square-shooting firearm.

V

Throughout the latter half of January and the early part of February Aurelian and George spent more time on the Lazy S range than they did on their own. But they perceived nothing to indicate that the northern ranchers were not walking the straight and narrow paths of peace. Of Charley Quay they never caught so much as a glimpse. Once or twice they saw Ruff and Cal and dogged them unobserved, but neither of these two gentlemen paid any attention to Lazy S cattle or committed any act that could be described as hostile to the interests of the Lazy S.

"I don't understand it," murmured George, toward the end of a pointless day spent east of Salt Creek, as he and his brother were riding down a draw, dark in the dusk of eventide. "It ain't like 'em to give up complete. Ruff's a bulldog."

"Cal ain't any hound himself," said his brother. "But I expect they're not exactly sittin' still. They've got something up their sleeves besides their elbows, those lads. There'll come a bust-up. You'll see. I wish I knew whether Charley Quay was going to be in on it. I expect if we

went along now, we might stop at the Lazy S. for supper?"

"Might, huh? As if there was any chance of gettin' you past the place! Me, I wouldn't ride a hundred feet out of my way to see any woman."

"There's a nice li'l girl waitin' somewhere for you, George, and about a week after you meet her folks won't know you. 'Who's this fine-lookin' sport riding past so gay and salubrious, all shaved and slicked up like a prize trottin' horse?' 'Why, that's George O'Riley,' says some other fellah. 'Remember what a low-down porcupine he used to be. Now he spends all his time in the barber's chair gettin' harrowed and mowed. Don't he smell pretty? Why, since that li'l girl took a-hold of him, he just swims in bay rum.' And, George, the minister, he'll come around and borrow his fee in advance on the strength of it."

"And I'll spit right in his eye and drown him!" snarled the goaded George. "If I had your imagination, Reely, I wouldn't wrastle cows. I'd be a lawyer and get paid for lyin'. Crawl that horse and shut up!

CHAPTER TWELVE

TIN CANS

I

AURELIAN came out of his blankets like a fox breaking cover. "George, did you hear that?"

George continued to snore. Aurelian padded across to the other bunk and shook George awake.

"Wha—wha's matter?"

"I don't know. We'll find out."

"This is one fine time to be curious. It ain't daylight yet. Go ride your own nightmares."

"Get your pants on. I heard a crash out by the corral."

"Horse slammed the gate open, likely. You're a nervous cuss. Why can't you wait till morning? Always got to jamber round disturbin' folks. Here I was dreaming I was rich and you got to wake me up. Here, wait for me, will you?"

But Aurelian did not wait. Pistol in hand, he was out of the house and hastening round to the corrals. The night horse was snorting and stamping. Aurelian looked over the gate of the first corral. In the bright starlight he could see the whole of the corral. There was nothing there that shouldn't be there. The two saddles, formless blots of blackness, lay in one corner. Facing the north fence, his neck stretched out, stood Jerry, the night horse. Suddenly, he whirled and began to circle the interior of the carrol at a bucketing gallop.

"Hey, where are you, Reely? This you?"

"It's my foot! Stand on the ground, clumsy. Jerry was looking at something through the fence."

"Making faces at it, I suppose," George said with sar-

casm, hurrying along beside his brother. "And you're going to apologize to it, ain't you? Always the gentleman."

But the conversational George fell silent as the starlight revealed what Jerry the night horse had been looking at. Crumpled against the outside of the fence, its neck bent back beneath its forequarters, lay the body of a horse.

"Locoed," said George. "What—Cans! Where'd they come from? We never throw away out here."

"Locoed all right, but not the way you mean. Look here." Aurelian pulled forward one of the horse's limp hind legs, and lifted the flowing tail. The cans leaped and jangled tinnily. "They're tied to his tail with bale wire."

George swore. Tincanning a dog is bad enough, but tincanning a horse is the act of a fiend. Because, unless roped and the cans removed, the animal will become a casualty in collision with an obstruction, or else run itself to death in the open. "One of ours?" George's voice was harsh. The light of the stars was not bright enough to bring out the brand. "Looks like Tornillo. Can you feel?"

"Yeah," replied Aurelian, his fingers busy on the left hip. "It ain't Tornillo. The brand is Lazy S."

"Wouldn't you know it?" George swore again.

"I told you they had something up their sleeves. They did it yesterday while we were over east of Salt Creek. One thing, Charley Quay wasn't in this. He's a fool about horses."

Which was true. Charley Quay's love for horses was proverbial in that country. He was known to have half killed one of his own punchers for maltreating his mount.

"I saw a Lazy S horse like Tornillo in the bunch that runs in Workman Cañon. But he had a white nose. I'll get a crowbar."

With the leverage of the crowbar they raised the horse's shoulders and pried out the head. The dead horse had a white nose.

"It's one of the Workman bunch all right," said George. "I wonder did they get 'em all."

"We'll find out to-morrow," said his brother.

George went back to bed and to sleep. But Aurelian didn't. He sat up the rest of the night, cleaning and oiling his Winchester and simmering inwardly. He was too angry even to smoke. Tincanning her horses! A deed to infuriate a man, but it would make her cry. Frighten her too, unless she had courage. He knew that she was in a way brave, but did she have the stark midnight courage to outface the devil and all his works?

Aurelian, that calm and methodical cowman, fairly wriggled on his chair with rage at the hellish act and desire to avenge it. Strong emotion is ever an enemy to clear thinking. It was not until he went out to the rain-water tank for a drink and saw the dawn streaming over the Sacramento Range that he realized he might never see another sunrise, and that George might not either. For it was Aurelian's intention to satisfy himself that the incident of the tincanned horse was not a sporadic occurrence, and then personally seek out Cal Collins, make direct accusation, and damn the consequences. If he himself survived the issue, he trusted to serve Ruff Lanigan in similar fashion. Aside from the fact that both cowmen were good with a six-shooter, their outfits were certain to resent armed invasion in a logical manner.

The cold air of early morning cleared his brain and brought home to him the realization that he was not being fair to George. The dead horse was not one of their stock, but belonged to a woman whom George did not especially like. George had everything to lose and nothing to gain in the campaign planned by Aurelian. Decidedly it was not George's fight.

Aurelian tiptoed into the kitchen, stuffed into a coat pocket some cold bread and fried liver left over from supper and went out to the corral. He was opening the west

gate to lead Jerry through, when he caught sight of George eyeing him malevolently through the bars of the south gate.

"Going off without me, huh?"

"Who? Me? Why, I'm just ridin' out to drive in our mounts."

"Which is why you're packin' your Winchester under your leg, and going out the west gate instead of the east gate into the horse pasture, where our ponies have been spending the night. Want to hog all the fun, huh?"

"One of us ought to stay and look after the ranch."

"We got plenty water and the wind's blowin' fine. You c'mon back to the house. I want my coffee and so do you."

II

On their way north they passed tracks pointing eastward of more tincanned horses, and found another Lazy S horse hung up with a broken leg on the Moore Well fence. Aurelian drew his six-shooter and expended a round.

"Tryin' to make her sick all right," muttered George, his eyes ugly. The dead horse, having struggled a good deal after hanging up on the barbed wire, was not a pretty sight.

West of the fence in front of Workman, after they had been up the cañon to a certain stone corral, they met Dick and Tom, the Lazy S boys, both very angry, riding the trail of some tincanned horses heading south from Workman. Dick informed them that persons unknown had tincanned all the Workman bunch, and that Minnesota had gone to the ranch. Aurelian spoke briefly.

Dick and Tom swore. "After midnight, huh?" said Tom. "They must have penned 'em in the stone corral yesterday afternoon. You make anything of the tracks, Reely?"

"Not a thing. Has Minnesota any notion who did it?" asked Aurelian.

"He didn't say."

By dint of hard riding they caught Minnesota Thompson in the act of mounting his horse outside the Lazy S corrals.

"Where you goin', Minnesota?"

"None of your damned business!" was the foreman's harsh rejoinder.

"That's all you know about it," said Aurelian. "We've seen two of those tincanned horses, and that mess of tracks up at the stone corral. They don't prove a thing, but we're goin' north to talk to Ruff and Cal anyhow. No sense in your going too."

"They're Lazy S horses." Minnesota's face was grim. "Twenty of 'em—the whole bunch running in Workman. Ruff and Cal tried something else, like you said they would. I'm going to stop it."

"Alone?"

"It's my job."

"It's your job to use your head and protect Mis' Gordon, Minnesota. George and I'll attend to this for you."

"I ain't never let anybody do my work yet."

"Sure, do your work, but do it the right way. If you abolish Ruff and Cal or they abolish you, there's trouble immediate between the ranches, and Mis' Gordon will be the one to suffer. But if George and I spring the joke, there'll be no trouble coming to her. Minnesota, old settler, you've got to look at things different and run 'em different when it's a woman's ranch."

Minnesota hesitated. Then, "I'm going!"

"Where?" It was the voice of Mrs. Gordon speaking. They had been talking louder than they knew, and she had approached unobserved. "What's all this about abolishing Ruff and Cal? And by Ruff and Cal, do you mean Mr. Lanigan and Mr. Collins?" The three stood silent,

abashed as school-boys before her accusing gaze. "What has happened? Why were you three talking so angrily?"

Before Aurelian could put in a word, Minnesota blurted out the whole story.

Mrs. Gordon's pretty eyes filled with compassionate tears. "The poor, poor horses!" She wrung her hands. "What an awful thing to do! But—but you have no proof that Mr. Lanigan and Mr. Collins did it. You have none, have you? I thought not. So having no proof, you were going out to kill them?"

"It was almost certain sure them," defended Minnesota.

"But," said Aurelian, cunningly as he thought, "Minnesota wasn't going. We were going in his place, so there'd be a responsible person left on the ranch to look after your interests. We're only too glad to do it. George and me, we never did like Ruff and Cal."

Mrs. Gordon wrinkled her pretty nose in scornful disgust. "Nonsense! How silly you are, both of you. I'm sure neither Mr. Lanigan or Mr. Collins would—Why, here they are!"

Here they were indeed, Ruff and Cal, driving before them two limping horses, bruised and cut about the knees.

" 'Lo, boys. Howdy, Mis' Gordon. Somebody's been tin-canning your horses. We ran across these two in front of Cottonwood, and roped 'em and took the cans off their tails." It was Ruff speaking.

"We thought they'd do better, lame like they are, in the Moore Well pasture," said Cal Collins, "than climbin' round the rims up the cañons. Somebody has got it in for you, Mis' Gordon."

Undoubtedly some one had, but that the some one was neither Ruff nor Cal, the scornful glance Mrs. Gordon bestowed upon the three men, said plainly. Nor was there anything to be done about it. Not a hostile step could be taken against Ruff and Cal. Their bold and unexpected

move had made their position unassailable, at least for the moment.

They even added to their prestige in the Eastern woman's eyes by offering to accompany Minnesota and the other two in their search for the remaining animals of the Workman bunch. Mrs. Gordon, however; declined the kindly offer.

Not until Ruff and Cal had gone their ways, did Aurelian remember that he had forgotten to ask Ruff about the ivory-handled six-shooter.

III

"What else could I do?" Minnesota bemoaned himself.

"Couldn't do a thing after they came in here thataway," admitted Aurelian. "And they knew it."

"Sure they knew it. This is what comes of workin' for a woman."

"Feel like quittin'?"

"Not until she tells me to. But if she wasn't Sam's sister—"

"Petticoats hamper a man, sure enough," George put in. "Women are too kind-hearted. 'No, thank you, Mr. Lanigan and Mr. Collins, you needn't bother. Mr. O'Riley and his brother will help Mr. Thompson find the other animals.' And out we trot with Mr. Thompson while Ruff and Cal go on about their business, if any, a-laughin' and a-jokin'. What sheep we are! Why didn't you talk right up to her, Reely? Tell her what was what? You ain't got a thing to brag about either, Minnesota. Me not knowin' the lady so well, I had to keep quiet, but you fellahs haven't any such excuse."

George was being most unfair, but then, Aurelian reflected with philosophy, fairness in a relative is not to be expected.

They were following a little bunch of five horses, that for a wonder, were keeping together. They found them at last at a water hole in Brazeale Draw. One was lying dead on the bank. The other four had bogged down. The three men roped them out of the mud and removed the cans. The animals stood with heaving flanks, the eyes in their hanging heads glassy and fixed. Aurelian inspected them closely.

"Just about ruined," said Minnesota. "Wind's gone. Hear 'em breathe. Never be good for anythin'."

"Think so? Two of 'em are team horses, looks to me."

"Our best wagon team," said Minnesota.

"Ever try to sell 'em?"

Minnesota shook his head. "Plenty tried to buy them though. They were as good as a pair of Missouri freight mules."

"Who wanted to buy them?"

"Sugar Roebuck and the stage company both. Not two months ago either."

Aurelian ran his tongue round the inside of his mouth and smiled. "Give me a bill of sale for the four, Minnesota?"

"How much you offerin'?"

"Not a cartwheel. I want to be able to sell 'em for you. You'll get it all."

"You can't sell 'em. Hear 'em breathe. Look at that *grullo* there. Worse off than the other three. Can't hardly stand up."

"Give him an hour's rest and he'll walk," Aurelian said placidly. "What say we drive 'em over to Bill Jackson's for to-night? Then in the morning you two can go on rounding up what you can of the rest while I see how the market for horseflesh is in Rosebud. I got an idea you won't notice their breathin' by to-morrow, unless they're hitched up or trotted, and I won't allow that li'l thing, you bet."

IV

"'Lo, Sugar. Got any room in your corral for a team I just bought? Want feed for 'em too."

"Sure, Reely. You're in luck. I've been trying to buy a team for three months. Here, I'll go out with you."

Sugar's eyes opened wide as he glimpsed the weary-looking pair of horses standing at his corral gate. (Aurelian had thoughtfully put the other two wrecks in the hotel corral.)

"I sure got me a good team here," said Aurelian, opening the gate. "Skip in, boys."

"That's the biggest Lazy S team, ain't it, Reely?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I tried to buy 'em a couple of months ago myself. Minnesota wouldn't sell. What's the matter with 'em?"

"Spavin, stringhalt, wind-busted, black-leg, epizootic, malaria, typhoid and scarlet fever. Outside of that, they're all right. That's a mighty small jag of oats for four bits, Sugar."

"My mistake," honest Sugar said hastily. "I thought you said two bits' worth. Get you some more *pronto*. You want to sell this team, Reely?"

"I just bought 'em. What for I want to sell 'em right away?"

"For sixty dollars."

"Sixty nothin' for these ponies!" Aurelian cried indignantly. "Why, Sugar, the diseases they got is worth a hundred of any man's money."

"You can keep the diseases, Reely, and I'll take the team."

"Well, I suppose I could keep everythin' but the scarlet fever. I've had that. But it's usual for the diseases to go with the horse. Still, I guess I won't sell. Get the rest of the feed, will you, Sugar? Howdy, Counselor."

Counselor O'Keefe hung a blue chin over the gate.

"'Lo, Reely. Sugar, g' mornin'. Ain't that the Lazy S wagon team yonder?"

"One of 'em," said Aurelian. "About that feed, Sugar—"

But the storekeeper continued to linger. "I'm buyin' this team, Counselor," said he.

"Is that so? Didn't sound like it when I stopped to listen."

"If that ain't a lawyer all over!" Sugar complained bitterly. "Always listenin' to other folks' chat!"

"Sure pays me sometimes," grinned O'Keefe. "You'd be surprised. About that team, Reely. Give you eighty."

"They're mighty tired horses, Counselor," said Aurelian. "They've had a hard trip. They ain't well either. Might get sick on you. You wouldn't like that."

"Can't tell me anythin' about horses," O'Keefe said loftily. "They're only tired, and you don't want to sell. Give you a hundred."

"Well—" hesitated Aurelian.

"One twenty-five!" Sugar, who had been watching Aurelian's face with hawklike eyes, bawled desperately.

"One forty!" retorted O'Keefe.

"One fifty!" flung back Sugar Roebuck.

"One seventy-five!" O'Keefe snapped in triumph.

Sugar fell silent. "We—ell, Counselor," drawled Aurelian, "I might consider one seventy-five cash."

"Cash, of course."

"Two hundred cash!" snarled Sugar.

"I don't want 'em that bad," said O'Keefe and departed forthwith.

Sugar Roebuck scratched a rueful head. "I dunno as I want 'em that bad, either."

"All right. Hey, Counselor, Sugar's sick of his bargain! Do you still want 'em for one seventy-five?"

Sugar instantly rushed shouting at Aurelian and forced wealth upon him in the shape of eagles and double eagles.

"I said two hundred first!" he yapped. "The team's mine, O'Keefe. You're too late. I just gave Reely the money."

Hastily showing the storekeeper Minnesota's bill of sale and writing out another for him, Aurelian left Sugar gloating over his purchase and followed Counselor O'Keefe down an alley. He joined the lawyer near the kitchen door of a Mexican restaurant.

"Here y' are, Counselor," said Aurelian, handing the lawyer a ten-dollar gold piece. "Five per cent. of whatever price you boosted him to was the contract."

"Much obliged. See you some time."

Aurelian sniffed the odors issuing from the kitchen door of the Mexican restaurant, found them appetizing, glanced down at his shadow and was not astonished to discover the time to be almost noon.

"No beef for to-night!" a woman's voice wailed in Spanish. "Not an ounce in the house, and to-morrow is the day the wagon-train from El Paso arrives, when we always have a good trade. Fool, you must get beef!"

"I have tried, my Beautiful, but, Heart of my Heart," murmured a deprecatory voice, "I can find none. No one has any beef to sell. At the present moment, my Flower of Guadalajara, there is not a cow in town except yourself."

Smack! Smack! Telesforio Tamborel shot from the kitchen door, dodged two chunks of mesquite and the lid-lifter, and took refuge behind an adjacent wall. "Ah, *Señor,*" he said, beaming apologetically at Aurelian, "the ladies are always so playful. My dear sweet wife— Aie, here comes that she-devil now!"

Telesforio would fain have fled, but Aurelian held him firmly by the arm. An impossibly ugly Mexican female, armed with the handle of a pitchfork, advanced in skirmishing order around the corner of the wall.

Her coal-black eyes glinted with pleasure at sight of Telesforio helpless in the grasp of the American. *"Muchas gracias, Señor.* I feared he had escaped, the worm! If the

Señor will be so good as to detain the descendant of pigs until I arrive—"

"My Rose of Andalusia!" squealed Telesforio, wriggling in an ecstasy of fear. "My Necklace of Pearls, have mercy!"

"A child should honor its parents, *Señorita,*" Aurelian remonstrated in Spanish, placing himself between the two. "Here you are beating your father!"

"*Father?* Although to my shame I say it, that *that* you are holding behind you is my worthless husband."

Aurelian promptly dragged the man to the front and looked from him to the Rose of Andalusia, who was holding the jagged-ended pitchfork handle at "Charge bayonets."

"*Señorita,*" said Aurelian, "I cannot believe it. You are joking. This old"—Telesforio was forty at most—"cannot be your husband. Don't tell me that you are a month older than sixteen!"

"Charge bayonets" became "order arms." A dimple resembling a bullet hole appeared in the cheek of the lady. A smile, garnished with stubs of teeth, split her face athwartships. "Alas, I have a daughter of sixteen," sighed the Rose of Andalusia.

"And beautiful as her charming mother, I am sure," said Aurelian, with a bow somewhat hampered by the descendant of pigs, who was continually seeking to escape. "Did I hear the *señora* mention a shortage of beef?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE HORSE WITH THREE LEGS

I

"See the horse race, Reely?" said Ruidoso Red, meeting Aurelian by chance in the hotel corral, as the latter was saddling up preparatory to departure.

"No, where?"

"South end of town," said Ruidoso Red. "Cal Collins bet Corny Burgoyne his horse could beat Corny's, and Corny lost twenty dollars. They're in the Silver drinking it up. Cal sure thought he knew a lot about horses, and now he knows it."

Aurelian, holding the bridle of his own saddle animal, had picked up the slack of the rope tied round the neck of the fourth member of the Lazy S quartette, which no amount of oratory had enabled him to sell.

"'Cal always did think he knew horses," said he musingly.

"Ain't it the truth? I'd admire to see somebody show him up."

"Would you?"

"Sure would."

"Willin' to help?"

"Spring the joke, if any."

"It just came to me," said Aurelian. "Listen—"

Five minutes later Aurelian and Ruidoso entered the Silver Saloon. Cal Collins, in fine fettle at having won a bet, was holding forth in a small group of which Corny Burgoyne made one, at the far end of the bar. Timbo the blacksmith and Bill Jackson were drinking together at the other end of the bar. Aurelian and Ruidoso joined them. It was noticeable that Aurelian and Ruidoso were raffish

in appearance, unsteady on their feet, and spoke with the thick utterance of gentlemen over-served with liquor.

"I tell you I can pur-roove it," said Aurelian in a loud tone, evidently carrying on a conversation that had begun in the street.

"Aw, rats, Reely!" rejoined Ruidoso, in a voice equally loud, pouring out his liquor with such an unsteady hand that the bottle neck tick-tocked against the rim of the glass. "Whoever heard of a horse with three legs that can walk, trot, run, carry a man, or pull a wagon, just like any other horse."

The conversation at the other end of the bar had died. Cal Collins and his immediate circle were all staring down the bar at the two newcomers. Timbo the blacksmith looked at Bill Jackson. It was the first time either of them had ever seen Reely O'Riley drunk.

"I tell you I know a horse with three legs can do all those thu-things," insisted Aurelian, downing a stiff drink.

"It's against nature!" Ruidoso declared, his body swaying with such vigor that he had to cling to the bar for support. "There ain't no such animal."

"There ain't, hey!" cried Aurelian, banging his whisky glass on the bar. "I tell you I've seen the horse—a horse with three legs that can walk, trot, ru-run, cuc-carry a man, or pull a wa-wagon, just lul-like any other horse. You want to bet on it?"

"I want to bet, all right," said Ruidoso.

"Mum-money talks," vociferated Aurelian, slapping a handful of gold pieces down on the bar. "Here's two hundred dollars says I can show you this hu-horse and pur-roove what I s-s-say."

"I ain't got a dime," hedged Ruidoso, "or I would, just for the fun of taking you down a peg. I cuc-could use your tut-two hundred right now."

"But-but you ain't gug-got the tut-two hundred. Mum-

makin' bets wu-wu-without money ain't bub-business."

Undoubtedly Aurelian was exceedingly intoxicated. Ruidoso began to be afraid that his friend, carried away by the fervor of the true artist, was overdoing his part.

Aurelian, his fingers all thumbs, began collecting his wealth. The sight of the gold returning whence it came was too much for Cal Collins. "Hey, Reely, old-timer, are you wantin' to bet only with Ruidoso, or can anybody get in?"

"Anybody. I dud-don't cuc-care who makes the bet."

Cal hurried to him. "Let's have the bet again, Reely. You'll show me a horse with three legs that can walk, trot, run, carry a man, or pull a wagon, like a regular horse. Is that it?"

"Just like a regular hu-horse," Aurelian assured him.

"All right. How much you betting—two hundred, huh?"

"Two hundred, and I wu-want odds," Aurelian declared firmly. "Wu-wont bet without I have odds."

"Even Steven, Reely, is about right, I'd say," said Cal.

"Wu-want odds. Got tut-to have 'em. Two to one. Mum-my two hundred against your four hundred."

"Even Steven," insisted Cal.

"The bub-bet's off."

"But I've only got three hundred and twenty with me."

"Awright, I'll take that."

"Not on your life."

"The bet's off, Cal."

"Wait a shake. I'll go you. My three hundred and twenty against your two hundred."

"Give it to Corny. Here's mum-mine."

"Aw, Reely, what you want to make a fool bet like that for?" remonstrated Ruidoso, plucking Aurelian by the sleeve. "You'll lose your money."

"Likell I will. Lul-lemme alone. I know my bub-business."

"Sure he does, Ruidoso," said Cal genially. "We all know Reely."

"Nothin' more to say," Ruidoso stated in disgust. "But don't sus-say I never tut-told you, Reely."

"I wuw-won't. We—we better have this bub-bet in writin', Cal. Let Corny do it."

"Corny will do fine. Got a pencil, Corny? Here's an old envelope."

Aurelian dictated the terms of the bet and Corny wrote with great care. "Here's what I got, boys," said Corny, after three minutes' labor: 'Reely O'Riley bets two hundred dollars against Cal Collins' three hundred and twenty that he can produce by four o'clock P. M. a horse with three legs that can walk, trot, run, carry a man, or pull a wagon, like a regular horse.' How's that, huh? Now you both sign it."

"Now everything's settled," Cal remarked with every mark of satisfaction. "You've got nearly an hour, Reely, to find that horse with three legs."

"I'd bub-better go out and huh-hunt him up. You fuffellahs wait here."

He staggered out the front door.

Ruidoso suddenly began to cough and splutter. "I fuffeel sus-sick," he muttered and went out the back way. Timbo the blacksmith and Bill Jackson, concerned for his welfare, followed him a moment later.

"He's sure got 'em bad," observed Timbo, watching Ruidoso, purple in the face, rocking to and fro on an upturned box. "Must be cramps."

"Silver Sam gave him a bad bottle, I guess," said Bill Jackson. "You better get you some hot coffee, Ruidoso."

"I wuh-will," said Ruidoso and collapsed in a heap. "Dud-don't mind me. I'm all right."

Weakly he crawled to his feet and reeled into the street.

Aurelian maintained his stagger until the corner of a building concealed him from the view of any one who

might be looking from a window of the Silver Saloon; then he ran. In the hotel corral he changed the bridle and saddle from his own horse to the Lazy S animal, led him out and mounted. Sedately he rode up the street to the hitch rail of the Silver Saloon.

"C'mon out, Cuc-Cal!" he shouted, sitting easily in the saddle, his fingers close to his gun-butt. Cal was an unchancy citizen.

Issued then from the saloon Cal Collins, Corny Burgoyne, Timbo the blacksmith, Bill Jackson and the others. Even Silver Sam came out to see Aurelian lose his bet.

"Where's the horse with three legs, Reely?" demanded Cal, looking up and down the street.

Aurelian flicked a thumb at the animal under him. "This is him."

"Him? Why, he's got four legs. I got eyes, and I can count. So can anybody else. Corny, ain't that horse got four legs?"

"Sure has."

"Then gimme the money, Corny."

"Wait a shake, Corny," interposed Aurelian. "Read the terms of the bet again."

"Reely, you don't sound as drunk as you did," Cal remarked with growing suspicion."

"Fresh air always fixes me up, Cal. Read her out good and loud, Corny."

The first deputy did so.

"There y' are, Cal. It says plain as day, 'A horse with three legs.' I win the bet. Pay me, Corny."

"Don't you do it, Corny. That horse has four legs."

"And that proves he must have three," Aurelian said gently. "I didn't count the fourth when I made the bet. It—it didn't seem necessary. Want I should walk, trot and gallop him, and hitch him up for you, Cal?"

Cal's face was black with fury. His right hand crept toward his gun. Aurelian waited, finger tips low.

"I wouldn't, Cal," Corny Burgoyne suggested in a low tone. "It's a fair bet—as far as it goes."

A moment the issue wavered in the balance. Then Cal spat on the sidewalk and laughed a harsh laugh that was not mirthful. "You win, O'Riley. The drinks are on me. Sam, is my credit good?"

II

"I see you brought one back, Reely," said Minnesota.

"I couldn't get rid of him. How did you and George make out?"

"Saved three. Shot one and found a couple run to death or busted their necks in arroyos. Tom and Dick saved one and killed two with broken legs. The rest of 'em are the same as dead. They went out in the Sands."

"You did well—considerin'. I did pretty good myself. Hold your hat, Minnesota. There ought to be five hundred and twenty there."

Minnesota almost dropped the hat. He set it carefully on the ground and feverishly began to count the contents. "Five, ten, fifteen, twenty double eagles, and five, eight, ten splits. Three hundred would be a fair to middlin' price for the whole Workman bunch, includin' the wagon team, and you got *five hundred and twenty for the three alone?*"

"Well, I won a bet with one. I might have used mine for that but it seemed fittin' like to use the Lazy S horse. Where's George—gone back to the ranch?"

"Nemmine George. Yes, he has. Tell me, Reely, tell me."

"First I sold the wagon team to Sugar Roebuck for two hundred, but I had to pay O'Keefe ten dollars for helpin' me. Then I bet Cal Collins that I could show him a horse with three legs that could walk, trot, gallop and so forth, like a regular horse, and—don't gape at me like that, Min-

nesota. Don't all horses have three legs? Yeah, well, that's how I caught Cal's three-twenty."

"But—but," cackled Minnesota, when he became coherent, "that bet is all yours, Reely. It don't rightly belong to the Lazy S. Here, take the three-twenty."

"Not me. It's part of the deal. I'd never have won it if those tincanned horses hadn't taken me to town. So you set it down to the ranch account. It's for Mis' Gordon, Minnesota."

"We-ell, puttin' it thataway—but lookit here, Reely, by your figurin' you made five hundred and ten, and here's five-twenty. Where does the other ten dollars come from?"

"Oh, yes. I forgot to tell you about that. You know Tamborel's Restaurant next the wagon yard. Seems they were all out of beef and couldn't buy any anywhere. They had to have some the worst way, so I sold 'em that other horse for ten plunks."

III

"Damme if I'll ever eat in Tamborel's again," declared George.

"Oh, he was a fat, young horse, and they said after they've cooked him with plenty *chile* and red peppers, they wouldn't know the difference themselves. Nobody else will, that's a cinch."

"What did Mis' Gordon say?"

"I don't know. I told Minnesota to tell her I'd bought some of the horses on spec. She leaves everything to him thataway. So that's all right. But somehow I just couldn't lie to that lady myself."

"A good conscience is a noble animal," said George sarcastically.

"I'll tell her the truth some day, honest I will. But right now all we can do is help her all we can and say

nothing how we do it. A fellow's got to respect her Eastern notions, George."

"I suppose. You took a long time gettin' back, seems to me."

"After I left the Lazy S I rode on up to the Flying H and the Rafter Box."

"You did! What did Cal say?"

"Hadn't got back from Rosebud yet. Ruff was away some'ers too. Well, I made my horse pitch all around both ranch houses and that gave me an excuse to say I'd lost my knife at the Rafter Box and some money at the Flying H, and of course I had to hunt for what I'd lost. Naturally. Yeah. I didn't find a thing out of the way at the Flying H, but at the Rafter Box I cut sign showin' how a pack horse had been loaded right next to an arroyo where they dump their cans."

"And the Rafter Box ranch house is closest to Workman. Then what?"

"I rode away, having business over in the San Andreas. About a mile out from the ranch house I cut the trail of the pack horse and two saddle horses, and I trailed 'em clear to the wash in front of Workman. Couldn't do much after that, but I did see where two horses and a led horse heading east had met up with a bunch of Flyin' H range horses and gone north with 'em a ways. Likely they turned loose the pack horse with the range stock, and then separated soon as they judged it was safe. Ain't any doubt of it's being Ruff and Cal."

"Not a doubt, the snakes!"

"And it's a long snake that hasn't a bend somewhere."

IV

On a day in the middle of February, Aurelian, who had been looking over the waters at the Horse Camp in Sulphur Cañon, and the Bat Ranch, a deserted ranch under

Strawberry Knob, checked his horse on the bench in front of the roofless 'dobe of the latter place and looked across country at the tiny bushes and toy houses that were respectively the tall cottonwoods and low buildings of the Lazy S.

A white speck moved out from among the cottonwoods and headed toward the tank east of the Moore Well. Aurelian did not bother to take out the field glasses in his saddle pocket. The Lazy S boys did not possess white upper clothing. But Peggy frequently wore a white sweater.

Aurelian went down the slope at a trot.

As he rode toward Hayfield Draw, beyond which on the rise lay the tank, he caught occasional glimpses of the rider still progressing toward the tank. Once in Hayfield the high ground concealed the other from his view. Aurelian reached the Old Spanish Road where it ran along under the lip of the break above Hayfield and halted his horse. Now he saw the rider quite plainly at a distance of no more than half a mile. The sixth sense possessed by those living on the open ranges, that augments their sense of sight, told him this rider was not Peggy, but a man in a white canvas coat—Charley Quay at a venture.

Aurelian took out his field glasses. It was Charley Quay riding head bent, his horse walking with a loose rein. Aurelian remained where he was and continued to observe Charley Quay. At a quarter-mile range the lenses brought Charley's face close enough to note the expression. Charley's usually pleasant cast of countenance was dark and lowering.

"Hm-m-m," murmured Aurelian. "Now I wonder."

He returned the field glasses to store and lifted his reins. Aurelian was riding Whiteman, whose name did not belie his color, and consequently was a mount to arrest the eye miles away. Yet Charley's preoccupation was so great that he did not notice the approaching horse-

man until Aurelian was within fifty yards. When he raised his head to stare the scowl remained an appreciable interval.

"'Lo, Charley," was Aurelian's greeting.

"Howdy, Reely," Charley said somberly. Then, evidently feeling that more than this was due between them, he stopped his horse, ironed out the scowl and achieved a passable grin. "How's tricks?"

"Can't complain. Not as much rain as I'd like."

"There never is. Helluva country. What folks want to live here for beats my time."

"Your liver's actin' up. What you want to do is get good and drunk."

Charley laughed shortly. "I believe you, Reely, and I think I will. So long."

Charley Quay passed on. Aurelian rode down into the tank to water his horse. When he spurred back to the top of the bank, he saw Charley Quay heading in the direction of Rosebud at a smart road gait.

"I'll bet something did happen at the Lazy S," Aurelian said to himself. "Guess I'll slide over there."

No one was in sight as he drew near, but Peggy's riding horses were all in the pasture. She was at home. But the boys were out. Not a saddle lay in the corral. He turned his horse into the corral, for he was on a sufficiently friendly footing to do that without invitation, and walked toward the kitchen door. His hand was lifted to knock when some one in the sitting room began to play a violin. His hand dropped at his side. Why, at the sound of those minor chords, did he think of a white church on a hill and the scent of lilacs blowing?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BETHLEHEM

I

He waited stiff as a poker. The music ceased, only to begin again almost instantly. The same tune, but now in accompaniment to a contralto voice as pure and clear as a sweet-toned bell.

"O little town of Bethlehem;
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep;
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee to-night."

Aurelian leaned against the door jamb. He knew now why that tune so swept the strings of remembrance. With closed eyes he saw again a scene of long ago; George and himself, two little tads in knickerbockers, sitting between their father and mother in a pew beneath the hammer beams in the cool old church in Hartford; the big brass lectern cast in the form of an eagle that always looked as if it were about to fly away; the lean back of the hard-working organist; the members of the choir singing with rapt, uplifted faces, some of them, that is—there were a few who always kept their eyes on the book; again, although there were none such within a thousand miles, he sniffed the scent of the lilacs, drifting through the open windows, and felt the arm of his mother go round his shoulders as it always did when "Bethlehem" was sung.

And while he listened to the hymn the pages of memory continued to turn like the leaves of a photograph album, and he recalled certain members of the congregation who used to sit near by; Little Ruthie Meadows, with her angel face, the cheek on the side away from her father distended by a succulent bull's-eye; Tommy Jones the peddler's son, who had more freedom and less clothes than any boy in town, but always attended church with his aunt, a fearsome and delighful female, mustachioed like a major; Captain Kilpatrick, bald as a pink egg, whose theory that the rifling of revolvers should have either five or seven grooves he was accustomed to dilate upon going home under the elms with Aurelian's father ("My dear sir, six grooves is heresy. What if it is the accepted standard? I repeat—heresy. A groove and a land should always be on opposite sides of a diameter. Now, when I was in the ordnance—"); Aurelian had heard him repeat this statement so often that he knew the words by heart. A tiresome man, Captain Kilpatrick.

Aurelian was to live to give thanks for that tiresome man.

II

"I didn't know you could play—and sing."

"My violin didn't reach here until yesterday. I've been hungry for it."

"It—it was great." They were in the sitting room, he standing before the fireplace, she tuning her violin beside a south window. The sunlight on her dark hair gave it the iridescent sheen of a blackbird's wing. "Why did you play that hymn?"

"Because it's Sunday."

"Sunday! I must have lost track."

"One is apt to—in this country." She smiled at him. He did not return her smile. "Kind of brought the old

times back. Made me think of Mother and Dad, and the folks I used to know—li'l Ruthie Meadows, and Tommy Jones and his auntie, and Captain Kilpatrick and his saddle—Now what in thunder did I say that for? Ol' Captain never rode a horse in his life, and he'd never bring a saddle to church anyhow."

"Church?"

He nodded. "Used to play that hymn in our church a lot."

Peggy, blessed with the eye that sees and the heart that understands, interpreted his mood correctly, and because it is not good for a man to dwell too long on memories, she raised her bow and broke into "The Vicar of Bray." She sang it too.

"Knew how to look out for himself, that fellah," was his comment when she finished. "He'd be a Congressman nowadays, I expect."

She nodded, smiling again to see him smile, and gave him "Black Sloven," a hunting song guaranteed to pull a Lazarus out of the dumps.

"That's sure one lively piece. I knew a fellah named Dick Dawson once. But he stole one horse too many. It's always the extra horse that stretches the rustler. Met Charley Quay passing the tank."

"He called on me to-day."

"Did he?"

Reflectively she tapped the violin with the bow. "What kind of a man is Charley Quay?" she asked abruptly.

"A fair kind of man, I guess, as men go," he said, true to the masculine code.

"Is it his habit to advise people?"

"Advise people?"

"Yes, tell them what to do."

What did she mean? "He usually minds his own business, I hear," Aurelian said with phlegm.

"Isn't he friendly with Mr. Lanigan and Mr. Collins?"

"I've heard so."

"Then why should he warn me against them?"

"Did he?"

"He did. He told me that Ruff Lanigan and Cal Collins might come to see me some time next month, and that whatever they wanted me to do I was to do nothing until I had talked things over with him first."

"Did he say what business Ruff and Cal had with you?"

"He didn't say."

"Made a mystery of it. Clever Charley. Wanted you to stew over it, I guess."

"But I'm not—stewing. It—I didn't like it."

He considered this. What she said did not account for Charley's scowl. Something else had put that look on his face. "He must think he knows you pretty well."

"He's been here twice a week since his first visit."

He glanced out of the window. Twice a week! He knew that the Box O manager had called more than once. Twice a week! Charley Quay was a handsome devil, well-fixed, and owned a way with women. But there was that scowl of Charley's.

He turned his head and discovered that Peggy was standing within a yard of him, one white hand resting on the mantelpiece. He looked at her—into her eyes, eyes as deep as desert wells. This was his opportunity to tell her what was in his heart. He had loved her from the moment of their first meeting. He had seen her many times since then.

He knew if she stayed permanently he must ask her to marry him. But he did not know whether she would stick it out. It was a hard country even to those who were used to it. To an Easterner accustomed to the refinements of civilization and the life of cities, it could easily prove a torture chamber. The vast loneliness of the desert; a silence that at times was absolute, sandstorms

that frequently blew for days and always piled drifts of tan-colored dust behind every window and doorsill, and sifted gritty particles into the cooking; the hard water; the lack of variety in the food, and the utter impossibility of keeping fresh meat except in the winter. More than once he had seen these things break a woman. He would not have them break her. She must have plenty of time, so that, if the country irked her, she could leave.

Himself he did not mind the drawbacks. He was used to them. And if there were drawbacks there were also compensations: Salinas Peak, late of an afternoon with the Sweetwater country red in the sinking sunlight, and the cañons, from Good Fortune south to Four Troughs, blue with velvet shadow; flaming sunsets and the San Andreas black against the blaze; indigo nights set with stars just out of reach; scent of greasewood after rain; desert flowers on the flat, Indian paintbrush in the mountains; brilliant mornings that made a man feel fit to toss a bear one-handed; long and shining days when one rode the range after cows, or the mountains after game; friendships deep and lasting, imbued with a selfless willingness to go the limit when necessary; and high over all, towering as the great White Mountain towered above the plain, the immeasurable freedom of a wilderness.

He hoped that in time Peggy would be brought to see this side of the picture. Whether this had come to pass, he could not tell. But he knew with a knowedge as deep as her eyes that he could not bear to have her become dissatisfied, unhappy. That would spell utter wretchedness for both of them. No, he would not speak until he was certain of the future. Manlike, he did not reflect that she might refuse him after all. In the presence of his lady no man ever does. It is when She is not there that doubt creeps in.

He did not dare look at her. A fellow couldn't stand

up against everything. The fragrance of her faint perfume almost cracked his resolution then and there. But he hardened his heart as a man does at a bullfinch with a ditch on the wrong side, brought forth the makings and rolled a cigarette. The moment passed. For him it left an ache behind. She had moved away and was leaning against the table. Her beauty was enough to turn a man's heart to putty. If he didn't—oh, the devil! Pull up your cinches, Reely O'Riley. Think of her, man, think of her!

She broke the silence with, "You've no idea what that business of Mr. Lanigan and Mr. Collins might be?"

"Want to buy some cattle maybe—to fill out a contract. Now I ain't aiming to horn in on your business, and I don't doubt Charley would give you good advice, but any time you want to find out anything you know where I live."

"I know—and I'll remember."

"Had any more trouble with tincanned horses?"

Her face clouded. "No, but—but I can't forget it. The poor things! The boys have been doing nothing but ride the range ever since. They've seen nothing suspicious."

"Neither have we, and we've been riding round some ourselves."

"I know. You and George have been very good. I—I'm grateful. More than I can say. But, Reely, I don't understand. I just don't. Who could have been so despicable as to do such a wicked, cruel thing as to torture those horses?"

"Did you ever stop to think somebody might be wanting to get hold of the Lazy S?"

"It is a desirable property," she admitted.

"You don't want to part with it, do you?"

"I don't think so."

"Did you ever stop to think that a good way of makin' you feel like selling cheap is to make you sick of it?"

She considered this. "Who wants the Lazy S?"

"Who'd be most likely to want it? Think it over."

Her dark brows drew together. "Do you think they'll try the same thing again?"

"Or something else."

"Still, I don't believe Mr. Lanigan or Mr. Collins—"

"Still, they're the first two folks you think of, ain't they?"

"I don't think they did it."

"Keep thinkin' it over. By the way, did Charley say anything about those tincanned horses?"

"Not a thing."

"Didn't you tell him?"

"I didn't think of it—yes, I did too, when he spoke of Mr. Lanigan and Mr. Collins, but just then the coffee boiled over and a cake I had in the oven began to burn and I forgot everything else for the moment. He left soon after. What are you smiling at?"

"It works both ways seemingly. Speak of Lanigan, and you think of the tincanned horses. That's all right, you know you do. Seen any of the Army lately?"

"Not since Lieutenant Saunders left."

"Then I guess those renegades are keepin' 'em busy over on the Pecos. But you be careful still, Peggy. No sense in taking chances."

"I never take any," said she, giving him an enigmatic smile. "A visitor," she added, and going to the door, admitted Mrs. Powers.

"'Lo, dear," said the old lady, her bright blue eyes flitting from her hostess to Aurelian. "Howdy, Reely. You do make more work for me and Flo! Dineen's leg ain't set complete yet. I told him if he kept on you'd kill him yet. I think he's beginning to believe it. Anyhow, it'll puzzle him to go to war again—ever."

"How do you mean?"

"Doc says he'll always have a stiff leg, and he'll never raise his right hand to Flo again."

"Why not?"

"When you spilled him something happened to the bones in his right shoulder and elbow. He can't lift his arm higher than halfway up his chest, and he can't bend it at the elbow only just. He never will be able to, Doc says. You sure did a good job. You needn't say you're sorry. I ain't and Flo ain't. He's been like a lamb ever since he learned the truth. He'll stay that way too, or—Well, I guess Flo won't have any trouble handlin' a feller with only one good arm. Yes, indeedy, the Lord He takes a long time to pay His debts, and He uses some queer instruments—no offense to you, Reely, you ain't queer one bit—but the Lord pays 'em in the end." The old lady chuckled grimly and turned to Peggy. "So with Flo gettin' along so good and all, I decided to leave her for a spell and spend a few days with cowfolks, honey."

Peggy Gordon's face lighted with genuine pleasure. "It's nice to have you come to me. Stay as long as you like—and longer. I'll make some coffee right away."

"While you're doing that, I'll get Reely to unsaddle for me. Come along, Reely."

Aurelian followed Mrs. Powers outdoors. Her riding horse was tied to the corral fence. As he loosed the reins he remarked that a forty-five Winchester rifle lay snugly in a scabbard under the left fender. He glanced from the rifle to Mrs. Powers. She nodded and went into the corral with him. "I'll take the rifle, Reely, and the saddle pockets. Heavy, aren't they? There's forty cartridges in each one, besides my own fixin's."

"Yeah?"

"Day before yesterday," amplified Mrs. Powers, "Doc Blazer found one of his cows dying from the wounds of three arrows, and the loss of a good twenty pounds of meat cut off her ribs and shoulders."

"That means Indians. They don't cut an animal's throat when they're in a hurry."

"Doc found three of his horses missing too, and in their places were the three played-out ponies belonging to those warwhoops that jumped the reservation and killed that rancher over on the Ruidoso."

"Those renegades! Doubled back, the devils! Leave a trail?"

"Not a smidgin, and from all I hear the cavalrymen are still scoutin' round for 'em over on the Pecos. Doc, he notified the Injun police up at the agency, but they won't do anythin'. They never do. So I thought I'd better come out and stay a spell with Peggy. Minnesota and the boys are away such a lot."

"They don't bother ranch houses much," sad he, stripping off the bridle and laying it neatly across the blankets he had spread over Mrs. Powers' saddle.

"They don't bother *our* folks' ranch houses but they might have heard Peggy is from the East and—uh—act accordin'. I like Peggy, bless her heart."

"You're one good pardner, Mis' Powers, and—"

"Don't be an idjit. When I like folks I like 'em. Pretty, ain't she?"

He nodded. "I warned her not to ride too far from the ranch."

"Close or far, I'll be with her, Reely."

"You're going to tell her about the renegades?"

"I wasn't. She's Eastern—might scare her stiff."

"She didn't scare when I told her before."

"The renegades were a long way off then. They're right close maybe now."

"You tell or I will. She won't scare. Besides, I've been teaching her to shoot some."

"Enjoyed teaching her?"

"Who wouldn't?"

She gave him a shrewd look. "She ought to have a man around—continual."

"Maybe she will some day."

"Don't make it too long, Reely."

He said nothing, but rolled a cigarette. Mrs. Powers stamped her small foot. "You make me sick! Got a tongue in your mouth, haven't you?" He delicately ran the tip of the organ in question along the edge of the cigarette. "I see you have. Use it, you numskull, use it!"

"It's a wild night on the canal, Mis' Powers. The mules will sure have to pin back their ears, I'll bet."

She shook a fist at him. "I'd like to fix their brother's," she snarled. "What you waiting for?"

"For you," he told her politely, indicating the gate with a sweep of his hat.

"I thought it might be for him," she countered in a low voice, her eyes flicking toward the gate.

He turned slowly. On the other side of the gate Charley Quay was in the act of dismounting from his horse. It was with somewhat of a shock that Aurelian watched him open the gate with all the air of a privileged and welcome guest, and lead in his horse. The nervy cuss!

"Howdy, folks," said Charley, with a special grin for Aurelian, a grin that did nothing to make happier for the recipient the end of a none-too-perfect day. "This is a surprise."

"I'll bet," Mrs. Powers declared herself grimly in. "She's in the kitchen, Charley. I'll go with you."

"You needn't bother," Charley Quay made haste to assure her.

"No bother a-tall. Comin', Reely?"

III

Stubborn Aurelian stayed right with the party until Mrs. Powers, exercising the privilege of an elder, shooed both him and Charley out at eleven o'clock. "Which I never saw two such fellers! Minnesota and the boys had sense to go down to the bunk house like Christians at nine,

but you two stick closer than a heifer to a fence post. Ain't you got any homes?"

"Managin' old party," observed Aurelian, awakening his sleeping mount with a tug at the bridle.

"You'd think it was her house," grunted Charley. "I'll see she don't hang around so much—after."

Aurelian stiffened. "After?" Well! "I'll tell you something, Reely," continued Charley Quay, moving, a black shape in the starlight, close to Aurelian. "Mis' Gordon—Peggy—and I are engaged."

"I expect that's why she calls you Mr. Quay?" Aurelian suggested instantly.

"That's it. We're keeping our engagement dark for a while."

"I see."

"I was hopin' you would. I know you've been comin' here a lot, and—"

"And?"

"And I thought you'd want to know."

"I want to know all right."

"I'd kind of like you to taper off on your visits, Reely."

"Fine night for a murder," Aurelian said cheerfully.

"You heard what I said. I look after what belongs to me."

"No harm in that—only you want to be dead sure what belongs to you."

"Don't you lose any sleep over that."

"I won't. After you, Charley."

"Huh?"

"I ain't intendin' to have you trail me twice. I said it was a fine night for—whatever I said."

Charley Quay laughed outright. "You're a cool proposition, Reely. I guess we understand each other."

"Sure we do. Oh, say, Charley, did you know somebody tincanned twenty head of Lazy S horses?"

Charley Quay whirled like a shot. "What?"

"Guess you heard me."

"I heard you. When was it done? It was, huh? I hadn't heard. I've been up at Tucumcari since the first of the month."

"Odd number your boys didn't hear something."

"Not so odd. None of 'em have been to town lately. Tincanned her horses! *Her horses!* Well—Adios."

Aurelian watched him go. "*Adios,* huh?" he muttered. "Yeah, I guess it won't be the tincanned horses you and I'll tangle about."

Trotting southward through the night, Aurelian looked up at the comforting stars. "She's no flirt, Peggy Gordon," he said aloud. "Add that to his scowl down at the tank, and the answer doesn't fit what he told me. Why's he lyin'? What'll he gain by it?"

What would he gain by it—beyond the hope of keeping Aurelian away. Aurelian smiled coldly. Try to keep him away! Just try it. Nevertheless, what Charley said was disquieting. Charley Quay wanted her—and he knew Charley Quay to be as stubborn as he was good-looking. Charley would keep at her and keep at her. This Aurelian could not prevent unless he became engaged to her himself. Would she have him? Withdrawn from her sweet presence, and keenly aware that she was desired by another fellow, he naturally made the acquaintance of that ancient enemy, the demon of doubt. A man never could tell what a woman would do. She liked him, Aurelian. But that did not necessarily mean that she loved him. "Charley Quay would fill almost any woman's eye," suggested the demon, riding high on his shoulder. "Persistent too."

Aurelian recalled a copybook maxim of his boyhood: "Persistence always wins." He began to consider whether it wouldn't be better to relinquish his plan of campaign and try a little persistence on his own account. Dare he risk it? He rubbed his chin and pondered, his heart pulling him one way, his intellect the other.

Aurelian was no cold-blooded fish, but he possessed a deal of common sense. He had charted a course—the one safe course, as he saw it, for both of them. Wouldn't he be a fool to abandon it now just because Charley Quay—If she couldn't see through Charley Quay, she wasn't Peggy Gordon. She was somebody else, somebody he'd never met and never would meet. With a groan of genuine wretchedness he checked his horse on the crest of a rise and looked back. A yellow spark gleamed across the flats. The light of her lamp. He felt his resolution crumbling. He knew that he could gallop back in less than ten minutes and end the suspense one way or another.

He lifted the reins, turned in both heels, the horse sprang forward—the light went out. As though the dousing of the lamp had been a sign he wrenched the astonished horse around and headed him toward the Drag R. "I'll wait a while longer," he decided, with the total lack of enthusiasm that attends most sensible actions, and throughout that wild night ride, for he did not spare the spur, was curiously oppressed by those more violent emotions that customarily attack the foolish.

IV

"Wanted her to talk it over with him, did he?" grunted George, filling the coffeepot for the breakfast coffee. "Looks like Charley's beginning to sour on his old friends. Did the outfit find any more twisted sleepers or tincanned horses?"

"No, and I asked Minnesota again last night."

"But that ain't saying there won't be any—or some other kind of dirty work."

Aurelian nodded. "Lots of li'l calves *poco tiempo*. I don't like it. Ruff and Cal are too quiet. My notion is we'd better do a li'l more riding round the Lazy S range ourselves. Start to-day, might as well."

"I guess—" CRASH! The kitchen door burst open, and a cloud of yellow dust swirled in through the doorway; the oilcloth cover billowed off the table and enveloped George, the coffeepot and most of the stove. Agate ware plates danced on the floor in company with knives and forks, pepper and salt cans and the chili bottle. The harsh and heavy roar of a big wind beat upon the world without.

From within the folds of the oilcloth came a gnashing of teeth and a hissing and bywords of a profane nature. "All the coffee right on the fire!" squalled George, fighting his way free of the winding sheet. "The mill, Reely, the mill!"

But Aurelian had already taken thought of the windmill at the upper well and was out of the house and racing for it as fast as he could run. Which was not too fast. For the wind was a whirling fright. It tore at his body, blew dust in his eyes and peppered his face with sand particles that struck with the force of thrown buckshot. He could not see the windmill at the upper well. He couldn't see the night trap fence fifteen yards away. The air was filled with thick clouds of yellow dust scudding northward like mad. He could steer a course only by keeping between the ruts of the trail that passed the windmill on its way to Grandview Cañon.

For an instant the wind lulled, and he heard above his head and to the right the furious humming of the fans of the ten-foot wheel. Heard too the shrill squealing of gearing in the working-head, driven at too high a speed. Stumbling to the right he saw, dim in the billowing dust, the tall framework of the mill. His outstretched hands were within a yard of the crank of the chain that operates to bring a windmill wheel at right angles to the wind, when the shrieking gale swooped down with renewed force, and the windmill, angle irons groaning and squeaking as they were wrenched out of shape,

heeled far over, hung quivering a breathless instant, then dived to the ground with a terrific snapping crash.

V

"Frame's twisted out of shape, every bolt started where they ain't pulled out, head's shot to pieces, and the wheel and the vane are so mixed up and skew-geed you can't tell 'em apart. Besides that, the whole mess fell on the ground pumping outfit and smashed that to smithereens."

"Couldn't be any completer."

"Couldn't."

"Troughs will be dry in two days."

"Maybe to-morrow. Horse Camp is dryin' up I saw yesterday. Bat Ranch is all right, but we don't want the Sulphur bunch watering at the Bat Ranch."

"No ridin' to-day."

"Not a step. Tell you what, George, I'll hitch up one of the burros and pump at the lower well to-day. That'll take care of the Sulphur stock when they come in to-morrow. You better take the wagon and go to town and make a dicker with O'Keefe for the big mill at his ranch. He's only kept a few head of horses this winter and he'll be turning 'em out any day now, so he won't need it much, not before he can get him a new one from the East. Needn't let him know how badly we need a mill."

"Trust li'l Georgie. I'll tell him we've dug another well. He can't skin me. Guess I'd better hire a man to help out, huh?"

"You bet. Two of 'em. This is one job we've got to rush. As it is, it's going to hold us back ten days or two weeks on our business up north. Will you listen to that breeze? I'll gamble the angels are curlin' their pink toes all right. How's the coffee comin'?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RUFF PROPOSES

I

Aurelian had been wrong in his estimate of the time required to put up the second windmill that George had by main strength, a maximum of eloquence and a minimum of regard for the truth, chivvied from the maw of Counselor O'Keefe. In the first place it was discovered after the dismantled mill had made the trip across the desert that a box of necessary nuts and bolts and the pump rod had been left behind. These were sent for. On the return trip the wagon overturned at the Bitter Creek crossing and the pump rod received a bend in its middle. Straightening the rod required the united efforts of three good men, and only two, Aurelian and George, were good. Then Aurelian took thought to examine the pump washers and found them so worn as to be useless. Another delay.

There were others.

When the O'Keefe windmill was at last erected and water was splashing from the pipe into the dry troughs at the ranch exactly three weeks had elapsed since the accident.

Nor in all that time had Aurelian been able to leave the place. But he had seen his lady once. She and Mrs. Powers had ridden down and spent a day memorable for a woman-cooked dinner. In the afternoon Peggy had sat on a timber at the mill and watched Aurelian. There was opportunity for general conversation, but none for an extended private talk. Yet he saw her. That was something. Nay, it was a good deal.

Of the renegades there was no news, Peggy said.

Some one had told Minnesota that the general opinion was that they had gone back into the mountains. At any rate, that was where the soldiers were searching. "I carry your saddle gun whenever I go out," she said.

"It's a good gun," said he, wishing his fellow workers elsewhere. "But even with Mis' Powers along you oughtn't ride this far. You never know."

"I like to ride so much. I know it's safe, or I wouldn't do it."

"Like the country yet?"

"I love it."

"Mighty windy sandstorm the other day."

She laughed. "It blew all my washing off the line. I never found some of the pieces. I had to wash and iron the whole day Tuesday."

It was all very well for her to laugh, he thought. This was her first bad sandstorm with its attendant ills. Would she be equally light-hearted after twenty or more? She was of finer clay than the women he knew. Did she actually have the heart and spirit that endures? Looking at her as she sat there, one booted leg crossed over the other, in a black-and-white riding skirt that revealed rather more tan leather than was considered seemly in the elegant eighties, those moderate years preceding the mauve decade, he wondered.

"Give me the brush," she said suddenly. "I can get the rust off those bolts while you're doing something else."

"You'll get yourself all dirty," he objected, aghast at the thought of those slim hands manipulating a wire brush.

"As if I'd never gotten dirty! Give me the brush. You grease them afterward, don't you? Is that it in the can?"

So she worked until it was time to go home. Working together. He liked that. It seemed no time before he was in the corral saddling her horse.

"Come to see me soon," she said, as he held the gate

open for her to ride out. "It's lonely at the ranch with the boys away."

"Boys away? All of 'em?"

"Yes. Oh, I forgot to tell you. A cattle buyer ordered sixty head of old stock to be delivered in Albuquerque."

"But old stock, Peggy! Who'd want stuff like that?"

"He did."

"Who was he?"

"A man named Kryle, from Cave and Cave in Albuquerque."

"Cave and Cave are a reliable firm, but I don't know Kryle. He's got a queer taste in cows. So long."

Mrs. Powers stopped her horse beside him and leaned down from the saddle. "Reely, she made me come down here to-day with her."

His heart bounced right up in his mouth. He managed a "Yeah?"

"Charley Quay has been over twice since the last time," she hissed vindictively. "You chucklehead, ain't you ever goin' to ask her?"

His retort courteous was to firmly close the gate upon the hocks of her horse, saying, with a grin, "See you some time, Mis' Powers."

Thereafter he did the work of two men. Ridden down to see him, had she? Showed what she thought of Charley Quay. He knew now that he couldn't go to see her many more times and not speak. Not after this afternoon.

"Hey, Reely, you can't lift that. Lemme help you."

"Do it with one hand," said Aurelian the chesty, and he did.

II

The two helpers were paid off on a morning in the second week of March and returned to town that day, leaving to Aurelian and George the adjusting that is al-

ways necessary in a job of this kind. Not until the following day was the mill running as it should. Too late to start north that day.

"I'll go north to-morrow, George, but you'd better stay in case the head kicks up," said Aurelian. "The ground pumping outfit can wait until I get back. There's nearly always plenty wind in March."

"We ought to put a mill on that lower well, Reely. Pumping with the burros is a nuisance."

"I know, and we will soon as we get a li'l ahead. This mill of O'Keefe's is going to set us back some. What we need first is new timber for the beam and wheel at the upper well."

"What we need right now is a load of firewood. We'll dig it this afternoon. Huh? Oil's in the blacksmith shop right where you were using it last. And don't you cut any more off the dishrag to swab out rifles with. Take the top off the flour sack. Not on the table, you jack! Think I'm goin' to wipe up after you? Sit in the doorway where you won't be tripping up folks with that long-barreled fieldpiece."

Hence it was that Aurelian, comfortably ensconced on the sill in the open kitchen doorway, engaged in the business of cleaning Minnesota's buffalo gun, saw two horsemen riding through what appeared to be an extensive lake, but was actually the customary mirage that turned the yellow and red sands lying along the border of the White Sands to water cool-looking and altogether lovely. Behind the plodding horsemen to the east the White Sands, that strange deposit of glistening gypsum more than a thousand square miles in area, that fills the Tularosa Basin from Salt Creek to the Cruces road, had lifted into high bluffs that shone and glistened in the blazing sunlight like snow ridges in the Arctic.

But there were no bluffs there, merely low dunes of gypsum sand where nothing grew except scattered cotton-

wood trees, stark and lonely, in the midst of the desolate waste, standing guard over the bones of unlucky Spaniards who had wandered away from their creaking carreta trains, lured by the water that was no water. Far across the southern horizon the magic of the mirage had changed the saw-toothed Jarillas to a line of tall and square-cut fairy battlements, purple as cloth of Tyre.

But the Sacramento Range to the east and the rocky San Andreas in the west retained their normal shapes to remind man that all was not unreality in the Tularosa Basin. The oncoming horsemen were not unreal either, and as they progressed from the mirage to the mesquite it was borne in upon Aurelian O'Riley that they strongly resembled men he knew.

"George," said he, without turning his head, "I think Ruff Lanigan and Cal Collins are about to pay us a morning call."

"Take out your wipe-stick and slip in a shell," George suggested amiably. "Do them good. Save you from losin' that top six-shooter, maybe."

"I'd like to," Aurelian concurred earnestly, and meant it. He knew that Ruff and Cal would make more trouble. Where he had expected only a wildcat he had grabbed old Ephraim by the tail without a doubt—and he couldn't let go. Nor did he want to. Giving battle for the sake of the lovely Peggy was like wine. It stirred his imagination, inspired him. His eyes were tranquil as he watched the horsemen ride up to the kitchen door. "Light and look at your saddles," was his hospitable greeting. "Dinner'll be ready soon. Killed a beef yesterday."

"Sounds fine, Reely," Ruff said smilingly. "One big steak would go good, hey, Cal?"

"Sure would. We started mighty early." Cal's voice was pleasant, but his eyes were not. It was evident that the matter of the horse with three legs still rankled.

"Then turn your horses into the night trap, and come on in."

"We don't want 'em to eat up all your grass, Reely," demurred Ruff considerately, for the fall and winter had not brought much rain. Grass was precious.

But Aurelian did not care to see the horses even of his enemies go hungry. "The night trap's for visitors' mounts. Turn 'em in. We got enough grass."

Ruff and Cal, their chairs tipped back against the wall, watched the preparations for dinner going forward, and fairly spread themselves to create an atmosphere of geniality and well-being. "The polecats!" thought Aurelian. He wondered what they wanted, and wished that they would come to the point. The circumstance of the ivory-handled six-shooter recurred to him. He went into the bedroom and took his gunbelt off the hook. "Here, Ruff, this your gun? I heard it was."

Ruff Lanigan glanced indifferently at the weapon. "Why, no," he denied, "I never saw that gun before."

So Bill Jackson had been mistaken. "I'm sure glad," said Aurelian, greatly relieved. "The Mexican who sold it to Sugar must have stolen it from somebody else."

"Most like," concurred Ruff. "Doesn't that steak smell good?"

After dinner Aurelian refilled the coffeepot, sank it in a stove hole, and the four tilted their chairs, dropped their feet on stove, woodbox and window ledge and rolled the brown-paper cigarettes. Ensued for a space a warm and cozy silence while the mesquite chunks blazed beneath the coffeepot. Then:

"That was a right amusing play of yours on Election Day, Reely," said Ruff Lanigan. "But I dunno that Shotgun Maxwell will make a good sheriff."

"No?" drawled Aurelian.

"In our opinion. You see, there's always been a straight party man for sheriff—one who always worked for

the party and had the welfare of his constituents at heart. What the county needs is a man like that—we think."

"There's no law against thinkin'," Aurelian said with becoming gravity.

Lanigan and Collins uttered a forced laugh apiece. "We wanted to see Cahoon elected, Reely," said Ruff Lanigan.

"So I heard."

"Yes. Of course we understood that your—uh—action was a mere prank born of Election Day exuberance, but you see how serious the results are. Sheriff Cahoon lost his job to Shotgun Maxwell, a man who, while undoubtedly a citizen of the highest probity, is certainly not fitted for such a responsible post as that of Sheriff of Rosebud County. Not only did Cahoon go, but so did County Clerk Monaker, County Treasurer Wryneck and County Attorney Shillaber. Four men are out who should be in as a result of your—uh—buoyancy of spirit."

"I thought it was my shotgun."

"Your shot— Oh, yes, that's one way of looking at it. But as I was saying, the results have been disastrous from a political point of view. Why, Reely, the party has been practically shot to pieces."

"And I didn't even have to shoot," murmured Aurelian.

"Lucky for you you didn't," said Ruff, with a touch of sharpness in his hitherto suave tone. "If you had, even your arrangement with the Sheriff of La Luz wouldn't have availed to save your neck."

"My arrangement with the Sheriff of La Luz!" Aurelian cocked an expressive eyebrow. "McGee just happened in."

Ruff's nod was equally expressive. "I know those 'happenings in.' McGee should have been more considerate of a brother officer."

"I don't know that McGee would like being called a

brother of Cahoon's," Aurelian observed, eyeing the tip of his glowing cigarette with a judicial eye. "Would you like it yourself?"

"You needn't have shown up Cahoon that way," Ruff evaded. "You made him absolutely useless for any purpose. It would have been more considerate if you'd shot him once or twice, enough to teach him a lesson. Then we could have run him again some time."

"Cahoon must have been a valuable man to the—uh—party," inserted George.

"But aside from that, what good was he?" Aurelian inquired bluntly.

"He was useful, and naturally we felt a li'l sore at your turning on him the way you did."

"Ran a bluff, you mean."

"We all felt a li'l sore," repeated Ruff, choosing to disregard the fleer. "But that's worn off now. We see how it was, and we make allowances."

"Boys will be boys, huh?"

"That's it exactly. But we'd like to guard against 'boys being boys' a second time."

"And—how—do—you—propose—to—guard—against boys—being—boys—a—second—time?" The words were as deliberately spaced as the hoof-prints of a cow crossing a mudflat.

"I'm coming to that. Here it is March already. Next year there'll be another election. We have our ticket planned."

"Shillaber, Monaker, Wryneck and Company."

"You read our thoughts."

"Not always," was Aurelian's modest disclaimer. "Sometimes I'm a li'l slow."

"That is, you almost read our thoughts. You forgot the sheriff."

"You'll have a job locatin' Cahoon. He's plumb disappeared."

"I told you Cahoon is useless. I intend to run for sheriff."

"You?"

"Me. We have a remarkably good party organization in this county, Reely."

"You got licked last election." Aurelian made haste to toss in his monkey wrench. "And you said the party was all shot to pieces. I heard you. So did George."

"I know, I know," Ruff Lanigan waved an impatient thumb, "I meant politically speaking. We still have the organization."

"Such as it is."

"Don't make any mistakes, Reely. We're strong. And we work together. All for one, one for all."

"In God we trust, all others cash. It's a good, safe policy."

"We think so, and we've decided that we'd like you and George to throw in with us."

"I've been wondering what was in all these wrappings. But I ain't so certain sure I like what you've unwrapped."

"Me either," contributed George reflectively.

"This decidin' for other people—it doesn't always work, Ruff."

"We could help you and George. Help you a lot."

"And vice versa," Cal said unsmilingly.

"Now, Cal, there's no need of that!" Ruff exclaimed. "Don't mind Cal, boys," he added deprecatingly.

Aurelian nodded understandingly. "I know. He only says what he thinks."

Cal started to speak, but thought better of it and inhaled deeply instead as Ruff broke in hurriedly with, "It's a mistake to get the idea that strong friends can't help a man. They can, tremendously."

"For instance?"

"For instance, take you two. You haven't been at it

long. You started in here the spring after Hatch's fight with Victorio, and you think you're doin' well, don't you?"

"Can't complain."

"But you can do better. You haven't any government contracts, have you?"

"Not yet."

"That's what pays. The agents, the right ones, are very broad-minded."

"They'll listen to reason?"

"They will—some of them. The Red Hill Agent, for instance. He hasn't given out the May contract for a hundred three-year-old steers yet. May twentieth, ain't it, Cal?"

"Yep, and there's another comin' in July."

"You see, boys? Government contracts, yeah, and we can help you to land one of those government contracts now and then. In fact, we'll manage it more than now and then, provided you help us."

"Sounds sensible, but how can we help you, a couple li'l fellahs like us?"

"In many ways. We'll show you. Be glad to. You know you boys are looked up to around here."

"Especially since last election."

"Let's forget that li'l mistake. You've got lots of friends, and you can talk to those friends and get 'em to vote for our men when the time comes."

"But how is that going to square with the way we voted last election?" puzzled Aurelian. "Changing horses thataway is bound to make talk."

"You've got a year and a half to make the change. You can do it easy like. Careful talk will do it. Most people are sheep. They believe what they're told and like to be led, and if you talk enough you can swing 'em backward and forward without makin' 'em dizzy a-tall. It's a good game, a good paying game."

"Has it paid you?" Aurelian asked pointedly.

"Plenty. You think it over—it and those contracts."

"Oh, I'll think it over. Leave it go at that."

"We couldn't leave it in better hands," Ruff assured him heartily. "C'mon, Cal. Let's wander."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE AGENCY

I

"Why didn't you tell Ruff to go plumb?" demanded George.

"Because I want to cinch those contracts myself first."

"Huh?"

"Didn't you hear Ruff say that Red Hill Agent is open to reason? Well, I'll reason with him."

"How?"

"I don't know yet. Tell better after I get to talking with him."

"Bet you my red horse Pink you don't land him."

"Go you."

"Don't you do anything to land us in Leavenworth."

"George, I'm surprised at you."

"If you win that bet, Ruff and Cal will surprise us sure enough."

"I expect they'll try when they hear the glad news. It's a heap providential. I can circle east and west across the Lazy S range and look it over, ride on through Stanton Gap and go to Red Hill. So I guess I'll slip up to the Lazy S this afternoon, George, and—uh—return Minnesota's buffalo. Been meaning to return it this long time, but every time I go up there I forget it. I can spend the night with the boys and get an early start. Save time and several miles thataway."

"Save you diggin' that wood, you mean," George said disgustedly. "To say nothin' of spending the evening with Mis' Gordon. Now I'll have to strong-arm those roots myself. There's that new top bracing on the branding corral. You rawhided one end of the pole and then

left the other end settin' on top of the next pole right where it can fall down on some fellah's head. Me, for instance. I set out there a lot."

"Oh, it couldn't hurt your head if it did fall on it; anyway, what right you got to sit down so much? Haven't you any work to do?"

"Plenty, seein' as I got to do yours as well as my own. I never saw such a fellah! Any excuse to get out of workin'!"

"Ain't I tryin' to land us a contract or two?" Aurelian demanded indignantly. "Do you want us to make money or not?"

"Oh, shut up! You could start to-morrow. It's the lady who's draggin' you away to-day. This business of us ridin' her range is just so you can get to see her oftener. I know you. We were getting along reasonable good till she came, and now look at the damn thing! I got to work myself to death diggin' up wood, while you lope out gay and salubrious and spend your time courtin' in society. I suppose you'll take my new shirt, the one you bought me for the one you spoiled."

"I'll have to. It's the only clean one in the outfit."

"I knew it. And you'll pull the buttons off the way you always do, and I'll have to sew 'em on, and if the wind don't blow to-morrow I'll be the one to hitch up the burro and pump at the lower well." George went out raving.

"See you have Pink all ready for me when I get back," his brother shouted after him.

Aurelian, twenty minutes later, was tittupping out of the corral, leaving George behind him, putting to the mule team with blows and curses.

When George returned from his labors that evening his weary eyes fell upon a familiar object standing against the wall in a corner of the kitchen. "If that ain't Reely all over. He's forgotten that buffalo gun again."

But if Aurelian had forgotten to return the gun he did not forget to stop at the Lazy S. He found a white-faced Peggy and a grim-lipped Mrs. Powers trying to teach two wobbly-legged calves to suck mixed condensed milk and water from bottles. Peggy nodded somberly. She seemed to have difficulty in speaking. Not so Mrs. Powers.

"What do you think, Reely? That Albuquerque delivery was a fake. They had to drive all those cattle back."

"What?"

"Yep. That feller brought the order for those cattle wasn't from Cave and Cave a-tall. Cave and Cave said they hadn't ordered any cattle, and never heard of this feller Kryle,—he said his name was."

"Yeah? What did he look like?"

"We didn't see him. He did his business with Minnesota. Now why do you suppose the boys were sent all the way to Albuquerque? Why, huh? So they'd be out of the way, and only us women here when some folks got in their dirty work."

"Dirty work! How?"

"Dirty work, and this is how: When they got back, and with old shells like that it took 'em twelve days about goin' and comin', they found dead cows all over the range. They'd been shot. Mammies every one of 'em, and the coyotes cleaned their li'l calves, all but these two the boys found first."

Peggy drew a surreptitious hand across her eyes. Mrs. Powers turned back to the tottery calf.

Aurelian O'Riley immediately dismissed all thought of going to Red Hill Agency. "How many cows were killed?"

"They found forty-eight," replied Peggy in a voice that shook.

"All mammies. And you saved two. That leaves forty-

six calves. Quite a haul. Quite a haul. Well, so long. I'm on my way."

He turned his horse. "Wait!" It was Peggy speaking sharply. She crossed to his stirrup.

"Well?" He smiled down at her.

She did not return the smile. "Where are you going?"

"Away on business."

"What kind of business."

"Just business."

"You're going to see Ruff Lanigan and Cal Collins. I can tell. I see it in your face."

"And a good thing too," cut in Mrs. Powers. "I never did like either of those lads, and if Reely thinks it's a good idea to go see 'em, Reely ought to know."

"Reely, are you?" Peggy's hands were on his knee.

"Why, no, sure not."

"Reely, look at me. You've never lied to me yet. Tell me the truth. Are you? The truth, Reely."

With her fingers on his knee, her sweet, troubled face within a yard of his, the knowledge that the fiendish cruelty of certain men was tearing at her tender heart, bringing bitter tears to those dark eyes, proved too much for his self-control.

"I'm going north to attend to Ruff and Cal," he told her between clenched teeth. "They sha'n't hurt you any more. Now you know."

"What proof have you that either of those men were concerned in this—this—"

"Men have been lynched on less proof than this. Leggo my bridle."

She clung firmly to the reins despite the injunction. "Not until you promise me you won't go near Lanigan or Collins, and won't shoot them if they come to you."

"Suppose they come a-shootin'? Want me to sit still and take it?"

"That's different. They haven't come a-shootin' yet.

You can drag me all over the place, but I won't let go until you promise."

He quieted the restless horse. "But suppose I get proof that they're at the bottom of this?"

"Let the law take its course."

"This ain't the East, Peggy. This is New Mexico."

"Promise me you won't go near Lanigan or Collins to-day or any other day, and that you'll do nothing against them without absolute proof," she demanded stubbornly.

"But Peggy—"

"Wait. I'm not through yet. And when you have proof that you'll give it to the sheriff and not take the law into your own hands."

"Reely could attend to it a heap easier and quicker, dear," Mrs. Powers said soothingly, shaking the milk bottle. "I wouldn't ask him to make so many promises, if I were you."

"It's my property that's suffering, and if Reely kuk-killed a man and it turned out later he was innocent, I'd never get over it. Never! Oh, Reely, promise, promise!"

Peggy's voice was rising hysterically.

"All right," said Aurelian. "I promise I won't go hunting up Ruff or Cal, and if they come around I won't go to shootin' at 'em unless I see they're goin' to do the same to me. If I find out anything, I'll see the sheriff. But if I catch 'em in the act of killin' cattle or similar, I've got to do something myself right then. Can't you see that, Peggy?"

"That's different, Reely. You'll have to use your own judgment in that case. But—but I don't like this killing people. It's dreadful."

"Reely come mighty close to killin' Dineen, Peggy. You never made any complaint then."

"I didn't have time, and he didn't kill him after all."

"You live here long enough and you'll change your mind about killin' folks when they need it," said Aurelian

sulkily. "Oh, you needn't say anything. I promised you, and I don't feel right about it, either. Your Eastern notions are likely to prove expensive."

"Now you're angry. Don't be—with me."

The words were like balm. She was certainly pernickety and held by a creed in direct opposition to that of the Southwest, but she was good and sweet and lovely, and a fellow couldn't stay sulky when she looked at him like that.

"I'm not angry—with you. Friends again?"

"Friends again."

II

The Red Hill Agency dozed in the warming sunshine. An Indian policeman, his shinning black hair in two greased braids hanging to his cartridge belt, sat on the trader's steps in company with two squaws wrapped in red and yellow blankets.

At the side of the trader's store a white man in an Isabella-colored shirt was lazily unloading a wagon. Frequently he would pause in his occupation to construct and light a cigarette.

Aurelian O'Riley, riding his horse Ploughboy across the flat, thought he had never seen a more peaceful scene. His eyes, narrowed against the sun, were attracted by the only moving object in sight—the wagon unloader. "Walks like Brazil Sharp," he said to himself.

The man carried a box into the trader's. When he reappeared, Aurelian and his horse were a hundred yards nearer, and Aurelian saw that the fellow was Brazil Sharp. Brazil, after one quick look at the approaching horseman, pulled down his hat, the one Aurelian had given him, so that his face was concealed by the brim, yanked another package from the wagon bed and hastily went into the store with it.

"If he feels that way about it, all right," muttered Aurelian. His feelings were not hurt. Brazil probably did not want to make his presence at the Red Hill Agency known to any one from the vicinity of Rosebud. "Guess he didn't think I recognized him. Funny. His cheeks and chin are as white as flour, and his neck and ears are sunburned dark as an Indian."

Brazil did not appear again.

Aurelian rode on to the building that bore above its doorway, the sign.—

U. S.
Department of the Interior
Red Hill Indian Agency

He tied Ploughboy to the hitch rail and without knocking, for to knock at the door of a government employe is ever a sign of weakness, thrust open the door and entered upon an interior equally as peaceful as that without. Mr. Squibbler, the agent, a gross, fat man, lay asleep and snoring upon a sagging sofa of the black-walnut-horsehair variety. Upon a table a large Maltese cat was curled in slumber as profound as the agent's, beside a volume of government reports upon which rested a black bottle and a tumbler. In each open window—there were three—stood an array of potted plants, scarlet geraniums and mustardy mignonette. Between two of the windows a heavy bookcase of local construction, its shelves bearing an array of old newspapers, old books and old boots, stood flatly against the wall. Empty bottles, cards and poker chips were scattered everywhere on the bare wooden floor, and a cuspidor stood in each corner of the room. Evidently the Indian Agent was in the habit of holding convivial parties. He had that appearance. His nose was very red.

Aurelian looked upon the agent and his pleasant sur-

roundings with an indulgent eye. He had never met the man either socially or in a business way, but he believed he knew him as well as if he had. He stepped delicately to the table, picked up the bottle and sniffed—once. "Bourbon!" His lips silently framed the word as he removed the tumbler to the water cooler and rinsed it. Aurelian was in some ways a fastidious soul.

An hour and a half later the agent gurgled himself awake and filled his startled eyes with the picture of a cow person in chaps nursing his private stock.

Aurelian lifted the tumbler and bowed gracefully, saying, "Your good health, sir," and tossed it off.

"Here, here! What do you want? Who are you?" The agent heaved himself into a sitting position while the sofa springs squeaked in sympathy.

"Get you a glass and join me," invited Aurelian.

"Who in hell are you?"

"Men call me Santa Claus."

"What do you mean by drinking my whisky! Get out of here!" The agent rose to his feet and started toward his coat, which sagged over the back of a chair.

Aurelian raised a protesting hand. There was a pistol in the hand. "Sit down. I'll get your coat. Ah, I thought so. You're hiding a six-shooter in your pocket. After I've unloaded it I'll set it on the table right in plain sight. Here's your coat."

The agent sat upon the sofa and regarded his visitor with baleful eyes. "There's a policeman at the trader's. I have only to raise my voice—"

"You'd better not."

The agent considered Aurelian's pistol and decided on discretion. "What *do* you want?"

"A contract for one hundred prime three-year-old steers to be delivered at the agency in May."

"I am not ready to give out that contract."

"No hurry. I can give you fifteen more minutes."

"You can't hold me up this way. Do you realize that you are threatening violence to the representative of the United States Government?"

"Who? Me? You're fooling. About that contract—get out your blank form."

"I won't do it."

"That's what you think."

"I'm saying so."

"Squibbler, shush. I know all about you. I know how much you dragged down in that deal with Ruff Lanigan last fall—three hundred Flying H steers, remember? And I know all about that deal between you and the Rafter Box last January—four hundred steers that one was. Do you want me to go on?"

"I guess you needn't bother. But—how do I know you know?"

"I went through your desk and your table drawer." Aurelian's pistol muzzle indicated several articles of stationery lying upon the table, that the agent had overlooked. "I found this packet of duplicate vouchers and the gov'ment ledger in the desk, and I dug your private and personal ledger and checkbook out of the table drawer. They make interesting reading."

The agent's flabby face had been growing more and more pasty. Now his complexion resembled that of stale rye bread. "Who—wha—why—"

Aurelian nodded. "Don't like it, do you? Neither would the gov'ment if they knew."

"What do you want?" queried the agent in a still, small voice.

"I told you—that contract for one hundred three-year-old steers to be delivered on May twentieth at—say, twelve dollars a head. Hold up, ain't there another contract to be given out in the summer? A hundred steers on July fifteenth? Three's again? Couldn't be better. I'll take that contract too at twelve dollars."

"That's robbery!"

"I don't like that word. Current market price sounds better."

The agent made another bid to save his face. "What do I get out of it?"

"Virtue is its own reward," Aurelian told him with complacence.

Then indeed did Mr. Squibbler realize that hard times were upon him. "But—but will you promise to keep your mouth shut if I give you these two contracts?"

"Oh, certainly."

"Then gimme those books!"

Aurelian immediately withdrew from the heap Mr. Squibbler's personal and private ledger and his checkbook. "I'm keeping these until the contract is carried out and the steers paid for. Then you can have 'em back. I don't guess you'll have the nerve to destroy the duplicate vouchers or the gov'ment ledger. My name," he added gently, "is Reely O'Riley."

The agent groaned. Reely O'Riley! the man who had held up the election officials in Rosebud with an empty shotgun, and had brought low the gambler and gunman, Four Ace Dineen. Nemesis, no less!

The contract was duly made out, governmentally stamped and carried over to the trading store, where it was witnessed by the trader's clerk and his wife, the latter in default of another man, the trader's new teamster, one Jack Plant, who had mysteriously vanished from the premises.

The witnessing was objected to as unusual and unnecessary by the agent, but he conformed under slight pressure to Aurelian's wishes.

Back in the office Aurelian urged the agent to join him in at least one drink. But the agent was not thirsty. He watched Aurelian ride away with hot and hopeless eyes. Jordan was a hard road.

III

Aurelian, desirous of ascertaining whether any of the Drag R cattle were drifting west through Sulphur, returned by way of that cañon. He saw no Drag R's west of El Paso Cañon, a side cañon branching north. Riding on past Cayler Cañon and the Horse Camp, he crossed the point at the mouth of the cañon and saw below him a string of red and white backs heading toward the point. These backs, he knew, belonged to cattle that had watered and nooned at the Drag R troughs and were heading back to Sulphur where the wild oats and grama grow.

He rode off into the brush so as not to head the cattle, which were mainly young stock under the leadership of a redoubtable longhorn known as Old Skilletfoot. Rolling a cigarette, he continued to watch them with idle indifference until one of them suddenly shook its head savagely. Aurelian dropped his cigarette and kept his eyes on that particular animal. The cow walked on, continuing to shake its head at intervals.

Aurelian mounted Ploughboy and rode to head the string. The cattle all raised their heads at sight of the mounted man, stopped and stood at gaze. Aurelian checked his horse and inspected the ears of the animal, a spike-horned roan whiteface heifer with a white saddle, that had been shaking its head.

"Crop and swallowfork the right, and crop and a half undercrop the left," he mused. "I wonder is that another of the Lanigan-Collins sleepers. I didn't expect they'd try that again."

He took down his rope, and kicked Ploughboy toward the bunch. The cattle turned and lumbered crashing through the brush toward the mountain. Aurelian circled and turned them downhill among the rocks and greasewood where they spread. Swinging his rope, he raced after the galloping roan, which he was glad to see had

no mother to guard it. He cut it back toward the wash from the cañon, spurred alongside and dropped his loop over the animal's shoulders so that the honda struck on his side of the withers and the loop swung in front of its feet. The heifer stuck both legs through the loop on the next jump, whereupon experienced Ploughboy swerved abruptly to the left, hit the end of the rope as hard as he could and jerked the heifer over on its foolish back as neatly as you please.

Dropping his reins and leaving Ploughboy to hold the slightly dazed heifer, Aurelian ran down the rope and hog-tied the animal before it completely recovered its senses. He eased up Ploughboy and took off the loop encircling the heifer's thrashing head.

It was then that he became aware of two men riding toward him through the brush. The sun was over the mountain and, standing in the shadow while they were in full sunshine, he made them out to be Cal Collins and Corny Burgoyne. A queer combination, thought Aurelian. He waited, hands on hips. It was not necessary for him to look at the sleeper again. He had seen enough.

"Howdy, Corny. 'Lo, Cal." His greeting was grave.

" 'Lo, Reely." Thus Corny Burgoyne, his eyes curious.

"Looks like you got what we're looking for, Reely," said California Collins.

"I don't know what you're looking for, but I've got something worth looking at."

Cal dismounted, and walked to the sleeper's head. "Yep, this is the one. Lookit there, will you, Corny?"

The deputy was in no haste to obey. He looked about him, at the mountains, at the cattle drawing together again and stringing out toward Sulphur. "Nice lookin' bunch, Reely. Plenty grass in Sulphur, huh?"

"Plenty."

"Now let's see what we got here. Sleeper, huh? Lazy

S brand the left ribs, don't they, Reely?" The heifer was lying on her right side.

"Sure do. It's a sleeper all right, Corny."

Cal, kneeling at the heifer's head indicated the left ear. "Crop and a half undercrop the left, Corny. See how far back that undercrop goes—almost to the middle of the ear." He pulled back the doubled right ear and spread it flat on the grass. "Crop and swallowfork the right. Made not more than three days ago, I guess."

"Made yesterday, more like," put in Aurelian. "They're still raw and hurt her when she hangs her ears on a mesquite. That's how I happened to notice her, knowing we hadn't marked anything lately."

"Must have been made day before yesterday anyway, Reely," insisted Cal. "It was day before yesterday when I saw her comin' through Sulphur."

"If you saw her comin' through Sulphur day before yesterday I guess she was marked that day then." Aurelian's tone was suave.

Cal glanced at him swiftly, but Aurelian's expression was as bland as his tone. "Yeah, well, day before yesterday or the day before that doesn't make any differ. The marks are here and so are these other marks here, Corny. See these other two marks like li'l splits on either side of the swallowfork. They're the ends of the Lazy S splits. Dirty work, Corny, by Gawd! Stealin' a woman's cattle!"

If Aurelian had not been a good poker player he would have gaped. He had expected something unusual from Cal's manner of opening the situation, but certainly his knowledge of the ways of the Rafter Box and Flying H had not prepared him for anything like this. Even for Ruff Lanigan, and he had undoubtedly planned it, this was *clever*.

If any further proof were needed that an ancient friendship had lost its significance, here it was. By no

more definite method, except by catching Charley Quay himself in the very act, could Ruff and Cal have made trouble for the Box O. For your average law officer is not prone to concern himself with metaphysical reasons as to why a crime has been committed. He is satisfied to deal with and employ the facts as he sees them.

Yet there was a flaw in the crystal, and Corny Burgoyne, honest man, perceived it. "This may have been done without Charley's knowledge."

"Punchers ain't kind-hearted enough to work over other folks' cattle with the earmarks of the ranch they work for, without orders from headquarters," pointed out Cal Collins. "You know it. What punchers do without orders is mark for themselves. This is the Box O mark. There's other queer things been happening too—tincanned Lazy S horses, and killin' Lazy S cows."

"You mean to say Charley had a hand in that?" demanded the deputy.

"I ain't sayin' who had a hand in it. But I can see through any plank when there's a knot hole in it."

"You think this sleeper is a knot hole?"

"What do you think?"

"I'll talk to Charley—about this sleeper."

"Good idea. Where?"

"At the Box O. Where else?"

"I got a better notion, Corny," said Cal, quite as if the idea had just occurred to him. "Save you a long ride to the Box O too. We'll turn this heifer into the Lazy S corral—if Reely don't object—and Ruff and I'll find some excuse, so he won't be suspicious, to fetch Charley Quay down here. We'll show him the heifer, and hear what he says."

"That might be dangerous—for you."

"We'll have to chance that—anything to stop this skulduggery with a lady's cows."

Both Aurelian and Corny Burgoyne looked hard at

the altruistic Cal. "I guess Shotgun and me had better be on hand too," the first deputy said dryly.

"Oh, sure," Cal concurred quickly—too quickly. "We're counting on that. Say three days from now, Corny. Better come out day after to-morrow, you and Shotgun, so you're sure to be there when we ride in with Charley the next day."

Thus was the matter settled.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THROUGH THE SMOKE

I

Two days later Aurelian and George drove up to Hembrillo Spring with a wagonload of barrels and kegs, for the rainwater tank was almost dry. Coming back in the afternoon, the wagon dripping like eaves in a rainstorm, they were halfway along the line of the horse pasture fence when they saw on the other side of the pasture—two thousand acres under fence—a rider careering about through the mesquite. He was racing this way and that, apparently without plan.

"I'd admire to know who that is taking exercise in our pasture so free," said George. "Reminds me of one of those crazy Mexicans driving cows."

Aurelian chuckled. "It's somebody tryin' to drive one cow. I just saw her flash between a couple mesquites."

"That heifer sleeper is the only cow in the horse pasture now." George leaned forward and stirred up the mules with a juniper club.

"Ain't he having a party?" observed Aurelian, as the wagon began to roll and heave like a ship in a seaway. "One cow sure makes lively work."

As every one who has ridden the range knows, one man may drive six cows, but it requires the coördinated efforts of six men and a well-grown boy to drive one cow. This by the way.

"It ain't necessary to hit *every* chuck hole," remonstrated Aurelian. "We're packin' water to drink, not to lay the dust or wet down the greasewood. You—say, that's Ruff Lanigan—a day ahead of time!"

George said nothing, but continued to apply with force

and precision the juniper club. They reached the main gate in time to see Ruff Lanigan head the heifer into the lane leading to the corrals.

Aurelian and George were waiting on the other side of the branding corral gate when Ruff drove in the heifer, a wild-eyed, thoroughly angry animal that almost slipped through to freedom before Aurelian could close the gate. As it was George only saved himself from being spiked by hanging a spur in her face as he went over the bars.

"Let's snub her up, boys," suggested Ruff, taking down his rope.

"Ain't you ahead of time, Ruff?" Aurelian asked without moving.

"We were to meet the sheriff here to-day, Cal told me," said Ruff, shaking out the coils of his rope.

"Three days from day before yesterday, makes it to-morrow."

Ruff wrinkled his sunburnt brow. "I thought it was to-day. So did Cal. Ain't the sheriff here yet?"

"Not yet. Be in to-night likely."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. Cal and Charley will be along shortly."

Even yet neither of the brothers divined what actually was toward. Ruff stood up in his stirrups and looked eastward along the road to Rosebud. "Guess there's the sheriff and Corny now. Let's stretch her out so he can see what's what."

There was dust on the Rosebud road. The sheriff and his deputy would be coming that way. George went into the first corral and got his rope. Within two minutes the heifer lay stretched between two ropes, one made fast to the snubbing post, the other tied to a post of the fence. Ruff led his horse into the first corral. The brothers followed.

"Something queer about this," muttered George, lagging back.

Aurelian nodded. "We'll know after a while."

The three men squatted on their heels in the first corral, rolled cigarettes and passed the time in desultory conversation. Aurelian thought that Ruff had never been so entertaining. He gave him that credit.

The sound of horse hoofs and the jingle of rein chains on the other side of the fence. Ruff rose to his feet and ground out his cigarette butt under a boot sole. "Here comes ol' sheriff and his pardner."

But it was not Shotgun and Corny. It was California Collins and Charley Quay. Ruff Lanigan opened the gate for them. His greeting to both was casually pleasant. Cal dismounted, but Charley Quay sat in the saddle, looking around him.

"Where's this animal with the brand you can't make out, Ruff?" queried Charley Quay.

"In the branding corral, Charley. C'mon."

Aurelian and George followed the three men. They looked at each other, the same thought in the mind of each. Previously to the present moment nothing had been said of an undecipherable brand.

The brothers, while they entered the branding corral with the others, did not precisely mingle with them around the prostrate heifer. They contented themselves with standing at one side, spectators pure and simple.

Charley Quay stared at the heifer. "That animal ain't branded a-tall."

"So it ain't," said Ruff brightly. "Did I say brand? I meant marks. Yeah, marks."

"See here, Charley," broke in Cal. "Lookit the right ear of this heifer. Notice the two li'l splits showin' both sides of your swallow-fork."

Charley Quay stooped to look. Ruff Lanigan sidled to Charley's left. Charley Quay straightened swiftly.

"Some jigger marked this heifer to make trouble between the Lazy S and me," declared Charley Quay in a

voice with an edge like a razor, "and I'm bettin' that jigger was one of you two."

There could be but one reply to such a charge. Charley's gun was half out of the holster at the last word. But Ruff's and Cal's had been wholly out. Followed then three shots, a tandem and a drag. Gray smoke overhung the body of the heifer, smoke that thinned quickly under the push of a light wind. Cal Collins, his heavy face set, still crouched beside the heifer's head. Smoke spiralled upward from the muzzle of his six-shooter. Ruff Lanigan, his dropped pistol lying at his feet, stood holding his right wrist and looking down at the body of Charley Quay lying face downward across the rope that stretched the heifer's hind legs.

The heifer bawled and heaved. Charley's figure moved with the rope as if it were alive. But every one in the corral knew that it was not alive. There is no mistaking a body from which the life has fled. It shrinks so.

II

Cal Collins holstered his six-shooter. "Hurt, Ruff?"

"Shot the gun out of my hand. Haven't any strength in my fingers. Be all right by to-morrow." Awkwardly, with his left hand, Ruff Lanigan picked up his revolver and jammed it into the holster.

"Then I guess we'll be goin'," said Cal Collins.

"Not yet," Aurelian said softly.

"Huh?"

"Our corral. Charley killed in it. Looks bad. Can't tell what folks might think. You're stayin' here, you and Ruff. Explain howcome to ol' sheriff. Looks better. Yeah."

"We will *not.*"

"No sense in our stayin', Reely," Ruff cut in pacifically. "I kind of think we'd better go."

"I think so too," declared California Collins and jerked his gun. "Reely, you make one move for your gun and I down you. That goes for you too, George."

"Is that so?" flung back the ever truculent George. "One of us would get you."

"*You* might—while I was stoppin' Reely's clock. I dunno that Reely would thank you."

"That's so, I mightn't," said Aurelian, and pulled the makings from his breast pocket. "Mind if I scratch a match on the seat of my breeches, Cal?"

"I sure do. The seat of your breeches is too close to your gun."

"Then I'll scratch it on the fence." With elaborate slowness he pulled a match from his hatband and shuffled between his brother and Cal to the corral fence. Cal, his eyes hard and watchful, backed parallel with him until he stood with his shoulders against the same section of fence. Aurelian scratched a match on a post, lit the cigarette, and turned to face Cal. His right hand caressed his chin. Absently he tipped his hat back with his left hand and then rested that hand against the heavy cedar pole above his head, that braced the posts.

"So you won't stay and talk to the sheriff, Cal?" he remarked, his fingers meditatively tapping the wood.

"I told you."

"Well—*What's the matter, Ruff?*" Aurelian's tone was rank with horror.

Involuntarily Cal Collins turned his head. Aurelian's hand, already clamped on the top pole, jerked the pole. The heavy stick, which Cal had failed to note was held by rawhide at the thin end some fifteen feet behind Aurelian, came down like a deadfall on Cal's head and knocked him cold.

Ruff Lanigan, amazed beyond measure, sprang backward, clawing clumsily left-handed at the gun that hung on his right hip. His spring saved his life, for George at

his first move had impulsively and instinctively pulled his six-shooter and fired at him point-blank.

"No, George, no!" cried Aurelian, his own gun out and trained on the Lanigan midsection.

"Which I should say not 'no'!" Ruff Lanigan remonstrated wrathfully. "Can't a feller's leg itch and him scratch it without you two chunkers cuttin' down on him?"

"Scratch your leg all you want after I take your gun," said Aurelian, moving upon him. "Until then you keep your hands right where they are—a-reachin' for the clouds."

"It ain't noways necessary to take my gun, Reely. I can't shoot left-handed."

"Not without a gun you can't," Aurelian rejoined composedly. "Give it back—after. You can scratch your leg now, Ruff."

"Thanks, but it ain't itchin' so much."

When Cal came to, Aurelian, George and Ruff were squatting on their heels, regarding him with becoming gravity

"Sorry, Cal," said Aurelian, "but you were so hot-headed, worked up and all, I just had to do it. I knew, feelin' the way you did, you wouldn't stay without a fight, and one killin's enough for to-day."

"I couldn't help you out, Cal," said Ruff. "I'm too slow on the draw left-handed and back-handed both."

Swearing with venom, Cal sat up and tenderly explored the immediate vicinity of a bump the size of half a hen's egg on the top of his head. "What hit me?"

Aurelian flicked a thumb toward the cedar pole slanting along the close-set line of posts. "Been meaning to fix it for ever so long. Did rawhide one end. That's one time *'mañana, mañana'* was no bad thing. Feelin' better, Cal?"

"Where's my gun?" demanded Cal.

"I'm keepin' it for you."

"They got mine too, Cal," Ruff laughed ruefully. "You know, Cal, we just *got* to have the O'Riley boys on our side of the fence."

"I ain't so sure," mumbled Cal. "Ask me that when I haven't got such a headache." He looked across the corral where the heifer still lay stretched and Charley's body still hung across the rope. "We might as well take him in out of the sun, huh?"

"We'll leave everything lay so ol' sheriff can see the play for himself," Aurelian said with finality.

"Well, maybe we'd better," Ruff assented resignedly. "Anyhow, it's nothin' to worry us. Cal began it. You're witnesses, boys. You heard him."

"We heard what was *said*—and saw what was done."

Aurelian stressed the fifth word in his remark, but Ruff had no comment for that. Instead:

"We've put up with a lot from Charley Quay. Only a couple of weeks ago he practically accused us of tin-canning those Lazy S horses. By rights we'd ought to have plugged him then, but Charley was young, hardly more 'n a kid, and engaged to Mis' Gordon and all, so we made allowances, and oiled him down on account of her mainly."

"Maybe he had his gun out at the time—and you didn't," suggested Aurelian.

"How the hell do you know that?" snarled Cal. "You weren't there."

"I didn't need to be," flashed Aurelian. "You just told me."

Even Ruff Lanigan laughed at the discomfited Cal.

A sudden thought flashed through Aurelian's mind. It shed a certain dim radiance upon a dark spot. "So after he told you he was engaged to Mis' Gordon, you killed him, huh?" he asked innocently, his eyes upon Cal.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Ruff Lanigan. But Cal's head had jerked up, he had started to look

at Aurelian, caught himself in time, and began to slowly rub the toe of his boot with a horny palm. It was enough. The dark spot was brightly illuminated

"What's that, Ruff? Oh, yeah, well, wasn't it after he told you about his engagement this happened?"

"You're puttin' it in a queer way," Ruff said slowly.

"Habit I got—sometimes."

Aurelian continued to look at Cal. He had the motive now, a premeditated murder was under his hand, and the men were guilty as Cain. But he knew his Southwest. The men would never hang for this particular crime. It had been done too openly. Charley's own words constituted provocation sufficient to satisfy the coroner and his jury, who, as hard-headed citizens of the Republic, would take no stock in what would appear to them as a far-fetched motive. Aurelian had no intention of introducing it.

III

"Reely, *how* did it happen?"

"About as they tell it, Sheriff."

"What date did they set for meetin' us here?"

"Three days from then—that would be to-morrow."

"Cal claims he said day after to-morrow—meanin' to-day."

"Corny heard different out in front of Sulphur."

"So did I hear different—from Corny. If it is murder, it's clever. From the lyin' reason Cal told him to fetch him here down to makin' him start the fraycas, they couldn't have arranged it better. No jury would convict. Ol' judge wouldn't even issue warrants. But they should have waited to show Charley those marks until we got here."

"Sure should."

Shotgun Maxwell rubbed his forehead. He did not like

these promiscuous killings. They gave the county a bad name and discouraged immigration.

"Doesn't look like there's a thing we can do," he said slowly, accepting the fact with reluctance. "But there's a fish smell about this you can sniff a mile off. I understand Ruff and Cal have bought out the other interests in the Flying H and the Rafter Box."

"Yeah?"

"So I hear. O'Keefe told me. They ain't said anything to me personal. Well, I'll send Corny to town right away for the coroner. I guess Charley will keep in the blacksmith shop all right till he gets here."

Aurelian nodded. "We often keep meat in it almost a month this time of year."

IV

The sheriff and his deputy, the coroner and his jury had returned to town with the remains of the departed. Ruff Lanigan and Cal Collins, legally unsmirched of soul, had also gone their ways.

"I hope that's the last we see of them for a long while," George said, alluding to the latter two gentlemen.

Aurelian concurred in this, but they were doomed to disappointment, at least in the case of Ruff Lanigan. That sprightly individual called upon them within four days, arriving in time for dinner. Aurelian wondered whether he had heard of the Drag R's contract with the Red Hill Agency. Apparently not, for his demeanor was entirely genial and his first words after dinner were:

"Decided you want that May Red Hill contract, boys?"

"Oh, we want it all right," replied Aurelian.

"Say the word, and you can have it."

"You might not be able to deliver."

"Don't you fret about that. Squibbler does what we tell him. Time's gettin' short though. You'd better make up

your mind soon. You join us, and we'll help you. Make no mistake about that. Cal and I, we own our ranches now."

"So I heard."

"Yeah. It gives us a freer hand, kind of."

"The bridle's off, huh?"

"Somethin' like that."

"I see. How's your paw?"

Ruff held it up and wiggled the fingers. "Not even stiff. It was all right the next day. Charley was a li'l slow."

The red-handed murderer! Having deliberately and treacherously encompassed the death of a former friend, his bare comment was that the victim had been a little slow. Yet Ruff Lanigan was a whole man. Aurelian and George did not underestimate him on that score. His lack of fear both for himself and consequences and his diabolical cleverness made him a notable antagonist.

"Cal's bump gone down yet?" queried Aurelian.

Ruff laughed with entire merriment. "Don't think any more about that. Cal's not holding any grudge. He saw how it was after I talked to him a while."

"That doesn't sound like Cal somehow."

"He knows which side the bread's buttered. He wants you with us—like I do."

"Allasame he didn't come with you to-day."

"He was busy. Now, Reely, just to show your good will and friendly feelin' for us, we want you to do us a li'l favor."

"How do you know I've got friendly feelin's and so forth?"

"I guess you know which side's the bread's buttered too. I ain't worryin'. Now if you do this li'l favor for us we'll see you get the July contract with the Red Hill Agency as well as the May one."

"What is the favor?"

"Cal and I want to take over the Lazy S."

Aurelian's hand that held a cigarette was as steady as a rock. He looked at Ruff calmly. "You picked a good one. Eight fine waters, five of 'em rock tanks, and the other three gravel springs. The range can't be beat. Yeah, you know what's what."

"But Mis' Gordon won't sell unless you advise her to."

"Won't sell unless I advise her to! What have I got to do with it?"

"The lady seems to think your advice is worth while," Ruff Lanigan said dryly.

"Then you've been to see her," Aurelian said with an expression blank as a mud wall.

"Not exactly. We sent Gabby Weston—he's her lawyer—to make the offer for us—a cash price for immediate sale. She told him she'd have to talk it over with you first."

Clever of Ruff, having a responsible, trustworthy man like Weston make the offer. Tactful too, since Ruff was one of the men who had killed the man to whom she was supposed to be engaged. "When did Gabby see her?"

"Yesterday. He came back to Rosebud last night and told us the bad news. Mis' Gordon's a right nice lady, Reely. Funny thing, Mis' Gordon denied to Gabby she was ever engaged to Charley."

"Did you ever tangle with a grizzly, Ruff?"

"Not yet. Why?"

"I was wondering. What price did you offer for the Lazy S?"

"Five thousand cash."

"About a quarter what it's worth."

"She's a woman, and she doesn't know the cow business. She'll never make it pay. Besides, look at the bad luck she's been having—horses and cattle killed. Of course, that stopped when Charley died. Odd number, sayin' he was engaged thataway and all the time doin' his endeavors to put her out of business."

Aurelian's gorge rose at the villainy of the man. "You think Charley Quay was at the bottom of those doings?" he managed to say with admirable calm.

"Why not?" Ruff Lanigan's stare was level. "As I was sayin', she's lucky to be able to get a price, and cash at that. Five thousand dollars is better than nothing at all, which is exactly what she'll get when the Lazy S peters out."

"Maybe Mis' Gordon doesn't know the cow business, but her foreman does."

"Oh, Minnesota's a top hand all right, but he ain't the owner. You know how it is yourself. Situations crop up that only an owner can handle, and a man at that. Mis' Gordon's a lady, and an Eastern lady to boot. She's bound to make mistakes, a lot of 'em, and you can't make mistakes in the cattle business and not lose money every whirl. So I say again she's lucky to get a fair price now and quit the game. Anyway, we'd take it as a favor if you'd talk to her, Reely, and when she consents to our terms we'll fix up the May and July contracts for you and George. Well, I'm glad it's settled."

"I haven't talked to her yet."

"But you will?"

"Oh, I'll talk to her. But not for any contracts. Just because I feel like it."

"We'll see you get 'em, anyhow," Ruff Lanigan assured him heartily. "I'm going across to Rosebud this afternoon. See you again soon."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE LONE RIDER

I

"Be sure you take Minnesota's buffalo, Reely," cautioned George. "You always forget it so you can get a chance to go again."

"I won't forget it this time, Georgianna, any more than I'll forget to ride my nice new horsie Pink I won on that bet with you. I'm going to rename him Red Hill, so you won't forget it either."

Four miles from the Drag R, as Aurelian was coming through the Indian Fireplaces at the break of the flat in front of Treasury Peak, he looked over the mesquite across a short-grass country and perceived a solitary rider tear out of the brush. The rider was at least a mile away and galloping hard. Now no horseman pushes his mount unless he has to. This rider was chasing no animal. Aurelian spurred down into a dip and, hidden by the shadow of a thick mesquite, peered out between two greasewoods growing on the edge of the slight declivity.

The lone rider, flogging desperately and presumably spurring with equal fervor would, he decided, pass between a hundred and two hundred yards to the north. He was traveling southwest, and was heading toward Grandview Cañon, a blind cañon in which the Drag R ran part of its cattle and saddle stock.

"Fogging along like the sheriff was after him, ain't he, Pink—Red Hill, I mean? Doesn't know the country either, or he'd never strike for Grandview."

The rider was no more than a half mile away when three other riders, racing hard on the trail, broke from the brush one after another at different points.

At this juncture the pursued's hat blew off. A cloud of black hair streamed lengthily behind the rider's head.

"Peggy! Peggy!" breathed Aurelian. "We'll see about this!"

He slid from the saddle, tied Red Hill to the mesquite, organized himself with Minnesota's buffalo gun and lay down on the bank of the dip behind a greasewood. Without haste he aligned a handful of the finger-long cartridges at his right hand and slid a round into the breech of the eighteen-pound weapon.

By this time Peggy Gordon was no more than a quarter of a mile away. She would pass closer to him than he had expected—not more than a hundred yards out. He thought of standing up and waving her to him. But that was chancy—the pursuers were three to one. He saw that her horse was failing. The two of them could never make the Drag R on Red Hill. And to reveal himself prematurely and fight it out in the brush might easily result in the death of both Peggy and himself. Not that his own life stacked against hers, not a whit. But he had to consider all angles. In order to save her life it was necessary to preserve his own. She was holding her line, and the three pursuers, riding fanned out a hundred yards apart, would pass so close to him that he could not help but make good practice. They had gained a little, those three pursuers. Their mounts were not flagging in the least. Aurelian narrowed his eyes. "Mexicans?" he muttered, knowing that no white man resident in that country would deliberately give chase to a woman. But there was something not Mexican about their hats and the way those three horsemen rode. One of them pulled something over his shoulder.

"Indians!" Aurelian whispered tensely, recognizing the motion as that of drawing a bow from its case. "Those damn renegades!"

Peggy Gordon, spurring and quirting a reeling mount,

passed so close to Aurelian that he could see her terror-stricken face. But it did not need that to steel his heart for the work he meant to do. A renegade is meat for any one's rifle. As the girl sped past him he saw that she was dragging the saddle gun he had lent her from the scabbard under her left leg.

"Good girl!" Aurelian breathed admiringly. "She's not too scared to make a fight of it."

It was the Indian in the center who had drawn and bent his bow. Aurelian momentarily regretted this, as it had been his laudable intention to drop the one farthest out first, trusting in this way to bag the lot. But he could not risk an arrow, because the Sharps is only a single-shot weapon.

The nearest Indian was not more than twelve horse-jumps away when Aurelian cracked down at one hundred yards on the Indian in the center. The buffalo roared like a cannon. The heavy ball, pushed along by a hundred and ten grains of black powder, bored the Redskin through the belt and knocked him kicking. The nearest Indian whirled like a flash into the brush. Aurelian sprang to his feet, reloaded hastily and shot him through the head at close range as he showed for an instant across the toe of the dip.

The remaining renegade was fleeing north as fast as his horse could lay hoof to the ground. Aurelian slipped in a third cartridge, dropped to the grass, raised the back-sight to three hundred, took a coarse sight and a steady squeeze and fired. The horse turned a somersault, but the Indian lit on his feet and ran like a jackrabbit.

It would never do to let the rascal escape, harboring revengeful feelings in his aboriginal heart. Swearing at what he considered wretched marksmanship, Aurelian snapped home a fourth round, flung himself across Red Hill and left. Straight across the short-grass country, heading for the brush on the other side, sped the renegade.

Red Hill's stretching gallop overhauled him three yards to his one. Aurelian noted that the redskin was packing his Winchester in his hand as well as the customary bow and arrow in the case across his back. The cowman was considering whether he was close enough to make a center shot when the Indian settled the matter for him by wheeling around and setting his rifle going like an alarm clock.

Aurelian jerked up Red Hill and dismounted in haste. He had not much fear of the Indian's lead. No man as pumped as that redskin must have been could hope to shoot anything but wildly. However, a chance bullet ripped a hole in Aurelian's hat as he knelt down. A fourth time the buffalo spoke. The renegade dropped his rifle, took two steps forward and fell flat on his face.

II

Peggy Gordon sat on the ground beside her drooping-headed horse, her hair in her eyes and her head in her hands, sobbing in a bad case of hysterics. Aurelian brought her hat and laid it on the ground at her feet without a word. He looked down at her shoulders shaking under the blue silk of her waist, and rolled and lit a cigarette. If he could only distract her attention, get her to thinking of something else.

He sat down beside her, saying, "All kinds of weather in the Sacramentos to-day. Can't see the White Mountain for clouds, raining hard in Tularosa Cañon, snowing in those high cañons above Green Rock, and there's the gran'-daddy of all thunderstorms sweepin' northeast across the flats between Twin Buttes and the mountains. See that lightning flash. Pretty, ain't it? Any cattle leaning against a fence down that way will sure be out of luck."

She paid no attention, but continued to sob. He continued to talk, and by and by the even monotonous tone had its effect.—"Mountain cattle make the sweetest beef,

but if we don't get more rain on this side the flats and more snow in the San Andreas, they'll sure have to rustle next summer."

She was no longer weeping violently, but she still held her head in her hands and tremors continued to shake her body. He laid a firm palm on her slim shoulder. "Come, get a-hold of yourself. I want to tell you something." She raised her head and looked at him dumbly. Her eyes were pitiful. "You're a ranchman now," he went on. "You might as well know all the grief."

She blinked and swallowed, her hands clutched together across her breast. She had removed her gloves. He noticed how tapering and white her fingers were. Dishwashing did not seem to have affected them a great deal. With the point of his knife he cut away the grass from a space about as large as a dinner plate and on this bare ground outlined the slightly flattened Lazy Eight that is printed in the brand book to indicate the ears of a cow.

Ruff's offer to buy the Lazy S had forced Aurelian's hand. He would have to tell her everything—everything, that is, except the real reason underlying Charley Quay's death.

III

"Then it was the Lanigan-Collins offer that sent you to me to-day?"

"Thank God it was."

"Things work out, don't they? I was riding down to see you when—when they chased me."

"You oughtn't to have risked it—not without Mis' Powers. She's as good as a man any day."

"Mrs. Powers had to go home day before yesterday. I thought it was safe. I knew the way."

"But you were heading for Grandview."

"They cut me off. Besides, Reely, you told me to come to you when I needed advice. You said 'Any time you

want to find out anything you know where I live.' So I came."

"But that's just a saying, Peggy. I meant I'd be glad to help you out any time. You might have known I'd ride up to see you after Ruff and Cal told me their proposition."

"I thought you might still be busy."

"You should have sent word instead of taking this risk. Good God, girl, if anything had happened! I told you to be careful."

She gave his hand a little pat. "Don't scold me. It's all over now. I'm safe. Tell me—I'm not quite clear about the earmarks." She indicated the conventional cow's ears he had marked out with his knife. "I was a little upset when you began talking. You mean to say the cow was mine?"

"One of 'em. She runs with Ol' Skilletfoot's bunch in Sulphur Cañon. One of our bunches. That's nothing. Some of our stuff runs with yours. Now your boys have been lazy. They sleepered this heifer, expectin' to find her again some time when they didn't have anything else to do and brand her, or else run the iron on her at round-up. Some other boy worked over this Lazy S mark into the Box O, and made your animal theirs."

"But—but that's stealing."

"We call it rustling. It's a new country. Queer things happen. Men get notions. Cal and Ruff planned this so as to get Charley Quay."

Her eyes were wide with horror. "You're sure of this?"

"Doesn't what I've told you point that way?"

"But it's murder."

"It's another of those things—like tincanning your horses. Fellahs that would tincan horses and kill cows—mammies with calves—wouldn't let murder bother 'em any."

"I can't believe it."

"Not even yet."

"But they don't act like murderers. either of them. Whenever I've met them they've been very pleasant."

Now what can a man do with a girl like that?

"Can't you see how this fits in with those other cattle I told you about?" Aurelian persisted patiently. "Their first idea was to get the Lazy S to lockin' horns with the Box O. That—"

"Why didn't you tell me about the other cattle before?" she interrupted.

"Thought I—we—might be able to handle it without."

"We?"

"Minnesota, George and I."

"Would you have shot those men if—if—"

"If we could have caught them in the act. I tried hard enough. But that was all I could do then or after. I wasn't close enough to 'em at the time to actually identify 'em. Of course there were the tracks and the dallyin' and the colors of the horses. More 'n enough proof for us, but nothin' like enough for law. Especially as they hadn't cut their own earmarks."

"Oh, Reely, you're hard. You talk so easily of shooting people."

"Sometimes it's easy to shoot them—not that renegades can be called people."

She shuddered. Involuntarily her eyes strayed westward where the two renegades had fallen in the open. "They—they're gone!"

"I—uh—removed 'em. Mighty near busted my cinches pulling the horse along and—" he changed the subject hastily as her cheek muscles contracted. "Can't you see how everything points to making you sick of the country, so you'll be willing to part with the Lazy S?"

She straightened her back and clasped her hands around her knees. Her dark hair, iridescent in the sunshine as a blackbird's breast, overflowed her shoul-

ders. Aurelian caught his breath. My! she was pretty!

"I suppose it does—in a way. But it's all a little mixed, Reely. What had the killing of Charley Quay to do with the Lazy S?"

Aurelian perceived that he had made a mistake. He should have glided as lightly as possible over that episode. "We—ell, maybe they thought he wanted to get hold of the Lazy S." Lame enough, in all conscience.

"Maybe they did, but—Reely, Mr. Weston said a queer thing. He said it was rumored in Rosebud that I was engaged to Charley Quay."

"Did he?"

"He did. Where do you imagine the people in Rosebud got that idea?"

"Maybe he told them—like he told me."

"He told you we were engaged?"

"And warned me to keep away."

"He did, did he? Heaven knows he proposed to me three times, but I never gave him the slightest encouragement. We were not engaged."

"I thought not."

"How could you tell?"

"I knew you. I knew Charley. I saw his face down by the tank that Sunday you played 'Bethlehem.'"

For a full thirty seconds she veiled her eyes, then she opened them wide and looked straight at him. "That was the last time he asked me to marry him. Tell me, do you think Mr. Lanigan and Mr. Collins could have heard this rumor?"

"I guess."

"And believed it?"

He nodded.

"I thought—I heard that Charley Quay was their friend."

"He was."

"Then why—"

"He got in their way somehow."

"Because he said he was engaged to me?" she probed shrewdly.

She had guessed it, and he was not going to lie to her. He nodded. "It's likely that was it."

She looked utterly miserable. "From their point of view an engagement might have barred the sale of the ranch," she admitted.

"I guess."

"Then it would be dangerous for any one to ask me to marry him?"

"He wouldn't look at it that way."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. You—you'd make any danger look mighty small."

"Would I?"

"You know it." He did not trust himself to look at her.

"What would you advise me to do about the ranch?"

"You're a woman. It's for you to decide. It ain't going to be easy for you here. You'll be protected. You can bank on that. But I can't advise you."

"What would Sam have done—what would he do if he were in my place?"

"I'll tell you what he did do, what Chiquita Baca told George—"

"Oh, his cook. I remember. Go on."

IV

"What would you advise me to do?" she asked again.

"I told you I couldn't advise you."

She looked at him, an odd smile on her lips. "You could—if you wanted to."

If he wanted to! What he wanted to do was to take her in his arms and kiss her hard. But the episode of the

renegades had been ghastly. This, together with the knowledge of the utter ruthlessness of Ruff Lanigan and Cal Collins might well have implanted in her an immutable aversion to the Southwest, and cause her to pull up stakes. If she decided to go away, although in every fiber of his being he ached to speak for himself, he meant to say nothing. Nor would he follow if she went. Even had he possessed sufficient income, he could not by the wildest struggle of imagination picture himself fitting either into the confining life of towns and cities or the hardly less circumscribed sphere of an agricultural community where men actually milked cows, land was fenced, and forty acres a respectable holding. Thinking of these things, he carefully refrained from looking at her. He did not dare to put too great a strain on his resolution. He was only human, and much in love.

"You could—if you wanted to," she repeated when he still kept silence.

"It's for you to decide," he muttered unsteadily.

"Then I won't sell." Her voice rang like a bell.

"You—you mean you'll stick?" he said thickly.

She was sitting stiffly erect, that odd little smile curving her red mouth. The dark eyes fixed on his seemed to him as large as small saucers. Her cheeks were very pink. "I couldn't leave now—even if I wanted to. But I don't want to."

His arms tingled to go round her. His heart was in his throat, and it was beating like galloping hoofs. "Will—will you—Peggy, I love—"

"No, no!" she cried wildly, her face changing on the word to a mask of desolate wretchedness, her arms outflung to thrust him away from her. "Don't say it, Reely! You—I can't let you! I can't!" She flung herself sidewise on the grass and burst into a storm of tears.

The dumbfounded Aurelian stared. What meant this fresh turn? What— He knelt beside her and rested the

palm of his hand on her black hair. "Look here, Peggy," he said loudly, for she was not weeping quietly. "I'm telling you I love you. I want you to marry me."

She took his hand from her head and blindly pushed it away. "You don't know wha-what you're say-saying!" she wailed. "They—they'll kill you too!"

"If that's all—" He slipped an arm beneath her body and raised her up. She struggled like a wild thing, crying, "Let me go! I led you on! Oh, don't you understand? I led you on! I— Let me go!"

He held her firmly upright before him, and demanded, "Don't you love me?"

Fat tears oozed from beneath her tightly closed eyelids and dripped down her wet cheeks. She made no answer. He shook her gently and demanded again and roughly too, "Don't you love me?"

"Oh, Reely!" An instant her eyelids opened. They closed as quickly and, "N-no, I don't love you!"

"Open your eyes and tell me that and I'll let you go."

At this she opened her eyes, tried to blink the tears away, failed, clamped her lids tight shut and said faintly, "I du-don't love you."

"You little liar," he said tenderly, and, holding her with one hand, tipped her chin back with the other, and kissed her defenseless mouth—hard.

It is history that she kissed him back.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE WOMAN OF IT

I

"If you hadn't kissed me, Reely, I think I could have managed," she murmured sadly. "Nothing seemed to matter after that. But I led you on. I can't ever get away from that. I led you on after I knew why they ku-killed Charley Quay. Oh, it was a cowardly thing to do! I don't know what I could have been thinking of! If I hadn't, perhaps—perhaps you wouldn't have asked me and—and—"

"I'd have asked you. I've been wanting to tell you how much I lowed you for ever so long."

Her arms tightened their clasp around his neck. "I've been wanting you to—for ever so long." An interval. Then: "Reely," she said wistfully, "are you sure it's worth it? No, that's no answer. You can't kiss away trouble, and that's all I'm bringing you. Boy, I know now. I understand. I was blind before. Those men are capable of anything. They—they—oh, I'll sell the ranch and we can go away and—"

"You said you'd stick!"

"I was crazy, Reely. I didn't mean it. I—Oh, Reely, we must go away!"

"You mean crawl into a hole and pull the hole in after us?"

"Don't joke, Reely. If anything should happen to you I—I'd go mad."

"Nothing'll happen, sweetheart. How could it, after this? Tell you what we can do, though. You go away yourself, and stay until this fuss clears up. Now that's a notion."

"That's all it is."

"You could come back afterwards."

"You mean that?"

"I'm saying so."

"But wouldn't you come with me if I asked you to?"

"I couldn't."

"Very well," she surrendered, and he forgot everything in the soft pressure of her lips.

"Please! I must breathe!"

"Well, this once. But usin' your mouth for that is a sure-enough waste."

"You like it—my mouth?"

He showed her, and said, "You don't know what a job of work it was to keep from letting you know."

"I knew though."

"Who told you—George?"

She sat up indignantly. "Of course he didn't! There was no need. A woman always knows. Do you suppose I'd have been so brazen as to lead you on if I hadn't known you loved me?"

"I didn't suppose anything," he told her humbly.

She softened instantly, pressing the palms of her hands against his tanned cheeks. "You came to see me often. You loved me. Why didn't you speak?"

He told her why. With a tender little tremulous laugh, she murmured, "Don't you know, dear, that the place doesn't matter if the heart is there?"

"I know it now."

She laughed a not unhappy laugh. "Reely, Reely, I could shake you, you slowpoke! Oh, I'm shameless! I tried to make you propose that last Sunday you came to see me. Are you willing to marry a brazen hussy?"

II

"I beg your pardon," interrupted a clipped military voice.

They parted in haste, staring. A few yards away a lieutenant of cavalry sat his horse, with true courtesy gazing over their heads at the top of Grandview Mountain. Two hundred yards east a detail of twenty-five cavalrymen were drawn up in line at attention and politely facing north.

"I beg your pardon, but—"

"It's all right, Lieutenant," said Aurelian in a fluster. "We're—we're engaged."

"Really—I mean that's splendid!" The officer dismounted lithely.

"Peggy, you remember Lieutenant Saunders of the Seventh."

Peggy smiled divinely upon Lieutenant Saunders. "Indeed I do. How do you do, Lieutenant?"

"Heart-broken, Mrs. Gordon. Some fellows have all the luck. Reely, you scoundrel, shake. You don't know how lucky you are."

"I think I do."

"You couldn't," denied the lieutenant, shaking his head dolefully. "Nobody could. You must please understand I wouldn't have inflicted my presence upon you if I hadn't considered it necessary. The fact is there are Indians about—three renegades—and I wanted to warn you. We lost the trail last night."

"Then you've found it again."

"You've seen it—them?" the lieutenant demanded quickly.

"I saw them," drawled Aurelian.

"Where?"

"Right close."

"Thank God they didn't see Mrs. Gordon or you."

"They saw both of us."

"But, Reely, they're bad Indians. They—"

"They're good Indians now." Aurelian glanced at Peggy, and saw that her cheeks had blanched a little. "I'll

be right back, Peggy," he said considerately. "I just want to take a *passear* with the lieutenant."

As he walked along beside Lieutenant Saunders, who led his horse, he detailed the entire circumstance. The officer nodded with complete satisfaction. "That's fine, Reely. If I'd come up with them and they'd chosen to surrender, they might have gotten five years apiece—possibly. Of course they were murderers, but without witnesses a murderer's as good as an honest man. There'll be no trouble. You have the Army's gratitude. There are the two horses, I see, and here *they* are. By Jove, Reely, what fine shooting! Each bullet in a vital spot. They're the very trio we've been hunting—Red Stick, Long Thunder and Painted Woman. You certainly spoiled Painted Woman's good looks. Remarkably fine bead-work on Long Thunder's bowcase, isn't it?" added Lieutenant Saunders, his eye beginning to glitter with the avidity of the born collector.

"Help yourself, Lieutenant."

"Don't you really want it, or the bows and arrows? That fringed knife sheath is an exceptional piece. They're all yours, you know. You won 'em. Mrs. Gordon might like them if you don't. No? Are you sure? Well, all right. That knife sheath will round out one of my groups superbly. Too bad I can't let you keep the horses, but they were stolen from Doctor Blazer up Tularosa Cañon."

"Might as well be getting back to your place, Peggy," said Aurelian, when he had rejoined his fiancée. "I'll catch up your horse."

III

Smoke was ascending from the kitchen attached to the bunk house when Peggy and Aurelian led their horses into the Lazy S corral. The boys, directed by Minnesota, had built this extra kitchen soon after Mrs. Gordon came,

and now ate their meals in it. Not that either the lady or the boys were in the least snobbish, but Minnesota preferred to get a meal over and done with quickly. With Mrs. Gordon a meal was a leisurely affair of conversation interspersed with food. Which was far from conducive to a will to work on the part of the two punchers, who, quite naturally, were her fascinated slaves.

"I'll go down to the bunk house and tell the boys and return Minnesota's buffalo," said Aurelian, spreading the saddle blankets over the saddles.

"Come back as soon as you can."

Night had fallen, the window curtains were drawn, and his lady, her black hair coiffed to distraction, wearing the blue silk of their first meeting, had supper well under way when he entered the kitchen. She let him kiss her only twice. "Not another one until after supper." He wandered around in the cheerful lamplight, looking at things, very much in the way. She shoved him out of her path with mock severity. He liked that.

"Why, there's my gun—my six-shooter I lost the day Fl—Mis' Powers came to call."

"It's mine now." She looked into the coffeepot and set it back. "I found it. Finders keepers."

"Where?"

She told him. "I remember it did rain that day. Must have washed your tracks out. You really want it?"

"I wouldn't part with it for anything."

When she had washed the supper dishes and he had dried them, she brought out a box of heavy cardboard and laid it on the table beside the lamp. "It's for you. Open it."

He lifted the cover and—"My Lord!" beheld the most beautiful six-shooter he had ever seen. The barrel and frame were cunningly chased. The foresight was silver, the hammer was gold-plated, as was the trigger and trigger guard. The side plates on the butt were of shim-

mering mother-of-pearl. He lifted it reverently. On the steel frame of the butt was engraved his name.

In this age such a weapon would be in the worst possible taste. They did things better in those days. She watched him anxiously. "You like it?"

His arm around her waist, he pulled her down on his knee. "You know I do."

"I hoped you would." Her fingers played with his ear. "It came three days ago. I sent your gun away to the makers and told them to duplicate its size in the finest weapon they knew how to make."

"They sure did that little thing." But his eyes were on her face.

"I meant to mail it to you without a sender's address so you wouldn't know until—I told you some day. It's —it's nice not having to wait."

"You—it cost too much. You shouldn't have done it," he chided, suddenly mindful of the fact that she was not wealthy. "It must have cost a fortune."

"Oh, not so much. I mean I—I don't spend a great deal here. I've—I've really been saving money, and how on earth should I spend it if not on something for the man I love?"

"There's a fire—a minister comes to Rosebud every month. I think he's due in about three weeks. I'll find out and make certain."

She hid her face in his neck. Holding her there, he knew that God had been very good to him.

IV

"Reely, when I think of what they may do to you, it —it drives me frantic." She clung to him trembling.

"They haven't done it yet." Strangely enough this remark did not comfort her.

"Oh, Reely, I wish—No, I won't say it. I know you

can't go away. You—you wouldn't be you if you did. Bub-but it's awful. I'm—I'm not very brave."

"I told you, honey, you could go away and stay until—"

"And leave you? I couldn't! Why, you're all I have."

"You see how it is, honey. You'll never know any peace while Lanigan and Collins are alive. Now wait"—as her body stiffened in his arms—"until I finish. I'm quicker than Cal on the draw, and I'm about as quick as Ruff. I could pick a fight with 'em separately—"

She raised her head and looked him in the face. "Reely! You promised!"

"I know I did," he told her gently. "But can't you see that killing those two is the only wagon track out?"

Her eyes held his steadily. "Reely, you're talking murder—again. You're planning to do what they did to Charley Quay. You can't do that, boy, you can't."

"But—"

"Reely, you're not going to break your solemn promise, are you? Don't—don't look at me as if you hated me!"

"Honey, I don't hate you. I couldn't ever do that. You know it. I'll keep my promise. But you said it would be all right if they crowded me to use my own judgment."

She nodded gravely. "That's different. Can't you see if *they* started it, it wouldn't be murder?"

"I see all right," he assured her, and refrained from pointing out that the handicap upon which she still insisted might easily result in murder—his own. "Don't you worry, Peggy. It'll turn out all right. I've had my warning, and that's a mighty big ace in the hole."

A man can't have everything, he reflected with philosophy. A woman who would have seen eye to eye with him regarding the advisability of ridding the world of a pair of rascals would not have been Peggy. He loved Peggy. That made all the difference.

Bong!

"Half-past eleven," she murmured comfortably.

"We've got half an hour yet. I'm sending you home at twelve."

Aurelian looked over her head at the clock and grinned.

She began to discuss with him whether they would live at the Lazy S or the Drag R after their marriage. They were still debating this question when the clock struck two.

She lifted a startled head. Although the dimmed lamp standing on the mantelpiece in front of the clock, gave but a glimmer of light, she was able to see the smile on his face. Affectionately she cuffed his ears. "Reely, you could see that clock. You saw what time it was, you sinner. This is dreadful. You know I'm shameless, but I don't want the boys to think so too. Go home."

He went, but not home. Quietly, for hinges constructed of ungreased wheel hubs and wagon axles are creaky things, he opened the gates of the three enclosures that constituted the Lazy S line of corrals and drove the astonished but grateful Red Hill into the horse pasture. Then he took his blankets into the bunk house and bedded down on the floor without awakening any one.

"Look what the dog dragged in," said Minnesota, when he slid out of his bunk at sunrise.

"Somebody left the gates open and my cayuse eloped into the horse pasture," explained Aurelian.

"I pushed the bars into the slots myself," declared Dick.

"You only think you did," contradicted Aurelian, pulling on his boots and retreating outdoors to the wash basin.

"I'll bet he opened the gates himself," said Dick. "I know I closed 'em."

"I don't know as I blame him—engaged to the boss thataway," said Tom. "Say, Minnesota, there ain't so many cattle watering now at Paint Rock Spring. Forgot to tell you last night."

"That's an odd number," said Dick. "I was in here

around noon yesterday and there ain't so many watering here."

"I was up in Ash yesterday myself," contributed Minnesota, "and there wasn't so many watering there either. I didn't count more'n twenty lying down. I expect they're drifting out on the flat again and watering at the Moore Well and the Drag R tank."

"I passed Moore Well yesterday coming back with Mis' Gordon," said Aurelian, standing in the doorway and vigorously toweling a tousled wet head, "and there were only a few fresh tracks in the mud. If they're watering at our tank you want to look out. The way the alkali weed is coming in to the east is sure a fright. We've been shoving most of our stuff west this winter."

"So have we, but now that the flats are greening up you can't keep 'em where you put 'em," said Minnesota. "But I didn't expect 'em to drift down so soon. We ain't had such a heap of rain and snow this year, but the winter weeds are thick in the cañons and there's a-plenty of old grass and wild oats—enough to feed three times what we got. And they just ain't satisfied. Boys, I guess we'll ride east to the Drag R tank this morning. We haven't been that way for a month."

"You haven't? None of you?" Aurelian's towel became motionless.

"No, why?"

"Then some one else has. I saw the tracks of a ridden horse following at least twenty cows east from the Moore Well. Tracks about two weeks old. Not more than three at the outside. I thought it was one of you fellahs. That's why I said you want to watch out for alkali weed if any of your stock is watering at our tank."

"I guess we'll look into this," said Minnesota.

"I guess I'll help you look," Aurelian told him. "How's the wood-box? I'm eatin' with you folks this mornin'."

"The axe is out by the woodpile," said Tom signifi-

cantly, it being his turn at woodchopping that morning.

"I'll have you an armful in two shakes."

"I don't hear his axe," said Tom a moment later.

Minnesota stuck his head in from the kitchen. "The boss looked out her kitchen door and saw Reely, Tom, and Reely has forgot your wood complete."

"Yep," said Dick, "he's just gone in. He'll eat breakfast all right, but not with us. The axe, Tom," he added significantly, "is still out by the woodpile."

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE ROUNDUP ROAD

I

After breakfast the four men rode to the eastward, their purpose being to cut the trail of the horseman and the twenty cows, whose tracks Aurelian had seen near the Moore Well.

Before they were in sight of the tank they saw more tracks of horses and driven cattle. "A good forty or fifty head in this bunch," said Aurelian, "and all heading for the tank. Looks like some folks been paying you a visit, Minnesota."

Minnesota nodded gloomily. His expression showed that he feared the worst. They discovered that his fears were justified. The nearer they approached the tank the more tracks of bunches of driven cattle they found. All, including the bunch of twenty whose tracks Aurelian had seen near the Moore Well, were converging on the tank.

On the margin of mud surrounding the water of the tank the story was written for any one to read. Eight men had collected there a herd of four hundred or more head. From the tank the herd had strung out eastward.

"Heading for the point of the Sands," said Aurelian, and began to sing *con fuoco:*

> "Jimmy—John—Joe he rode a white horse,
> Rode a white horse, rode a white horse,
> Jimmy—John—Joe he rode a white horse,
> All the wa-a-a-ay from Lincoln."

Minnesota swore. "That's it, they've sicked some of the wild bunch from Lincoln County on us."

"And it's only a hundred miles to Old Mayheeco," said Dick.

"They may take 'em to Three Rivers and between the Phillips Hills and the White Mountain north Carrizozo way," suggested Tom. "Plenty water and grass."

Aurelian, inclining to Dick's opinion, shook his head. "The roundup road east of the Sands for a bet. There's been rain down that way this winter. Plenty li'l lakes and some grass."

"They'd have made it to El Paso all right," said Minnesota. "Let's go."

"With you boys travelin' north and us busy with the mill, it was a two-barreled cinch," said Aurelian.

They followed the plainly marked trail to the point of the Sands, and saw that it turned southeast along the edge of the salt-white dunes.

"Told you," said Aurelian.

"Well, we'll follow 'em," said Minnesota.

"I wish George was along," said Aurelian, "and that I had a rifle," he added, eyeing the Winchesters under the left fenders of his comrades' saddles. "Even your field-piece would be a help, Minnesota. I—" his gaze sought the distance where a tiny drift of yellow dust crawled beneath the eastern hills. "That's a freight outfit yonder," he said with apparent irrelevance. "Two wagons, the noblest products of the brains of Messrs. Bass and Trout, the Fish Brothers; or maybe Mitchell made 'em if that's Freighter Philip and his eight Missouri mocking-birds. You know, ladies and gents and li'l children, in order to include Tom and Dick, I think I'd better look into this. I got me a curiosity about those wagons."

"It always gets 'em," said Dick seriously, "when they stay out in the hills too long."

"Crazy," agreed Tom.

"Reely—" began Minnesota, "if you ain't—"

"Oh, I am, I admit it. Absolutely bats. You're going

to follow this trail, ain't you? All right. Meet you in El Paso. Three days from now at high noon in Ol' Man Brown's Place on Texas Street. He sells the best. Now before you go off like a gun, do you want those cattle back?"

"You're damn right I want those cattle back, but wantin' and gettin' are too different to be similar."

"I want 'em back too, because it's a cinch there's forty or fifty head of Drag R's in the bunch, and I ain't kissed 'em good-bye a-tall. I got me a yearnin' ache to see their hides a-hangin' on my corral fence, or the money for 'em hangin' on a fat pink check good at any bank. I aim to make these wonders to perform by attendin' to it personal, yours truly, Aurelian O'Riley, sometimes known as Old Pie on the Wabash, or the Curly Wild Wolf of Grandview Cañon and points west. Lend me Thomas or Richard, will—"

"Reely," Minnesota broke in desperately upon the oratory, "what are you aimin' to do?"

"I told you plain in words of one syllable. I'll backtrack for your purblind benefit. You want your cattle back. I want mine."

"They're in Chihuahua by now, and you know it. All we can do is maybe get a line who turned the trick and put 'em where they belong."

"Oh, that," said Aurelian lightly, "would be nice, but the lowin' herd comes first. Leave it to me. Papa knows best. Make you a bet, Minnesota. Even money we get half the bunch back, one to two we get two-thirds and one to five we get 'em all. Finger-bet you twenty."

"Done," chorused as one man the Lazy S outfit.

"I've spent my winnings already," grinned Aurelian. "Lend me Tom or Dick, Minnesota. I want to tell George to come to Rosebud right away. You'll be sendin' somebody back to the ranch anyway, if you're going to follow this trail."

"Somebody's got to be there," said Minnesota. "No knowing how long we'll be gone. Tom—"

"Aw, send Dick," Tom remonstrated in acutest anguish. "I never have any fun, I don't."

"I'll toss you," Dick interposed swiftly. "Heads I win, tails you lose." He flipped the coin. "Tails she is. You lose. Here, look for yourself."

"That don't sound right somehow," said Tom slowly. "But—"

"Be a sport. Take your medicine."

"Sure," said Minnesota, preferring to take along Dick as being always quicker on the uptake. "You're elected, Tom. If the wind don't blow to-day or to-morrow, you'll have to pump. How about you, Reely, with George away too?"

"They'll just have to rustle along somehow. Our troughs were full yesterday, and George he pumped at the lower well day before yesterday."

"Tom can pump turnabout at both places, if he has to, or keep the mills runnin' if he has luck with a breeze. So that's all right."

"Now that's right clever of you, Minnesota. Just for that, I'll let off you three fellahs half your losin's. That's me. Always the gentleman. Tell George to fetch along two rifles, will you, Tom? I'll be at the Winkle Hotel or if I ain't, he can ask the bartender. Any bartender. So long, boys. Ol' Man Brown's on Texas Street."

"I sure would admire to know what Reely O'Riley has up his sleeve," said Dick when he and the Lazy S foreman were trotting toward the roundup road on the trail of the stolen herd.

"We'll find out in El Paso. Whatever it is, I'll gamble it's good. I might have known when he began talkin' foolish thataway that he had an idea. Yeah, when two or three are gathered together, it ain't him who's the idjit. Naw sir. Him and his freighter outfit he had to investigate!"

II

"Philip and his eight particular friends," said Aurelian, entering Sugar Roebuck's wagon yard where the freighter was unhitching his eight-mule team. "Lemme help you."

"Watch your hat and coat, Philip," enjoined Sugar, appearing from behind the trail wagon. "That Reely O'Riley ain't got any moral sense whatever."

"I thought I recognized your duck feet and bowlegs, Sugar," said Aurelian composedly, beginning to unhook the pipeless chain traces. "How's your fine new wagon team?"

Philip laughed. "I heard about that. What made you do it, Sugar?"

"He did," Sugar told him frankly. "I knew in my soul—"

"You mean in your pants' pocket," corrected Aurelian severely. "Storekeepers don't have souls."

"I knew that team wasn't worth a dime more'n one hundred plunks, and I paid him two hundred for a pair of wind busted crowbaits that couldn't pull a thousand pounds without blowin' their lungs out."

"I wondered if you'd found that out yet," said Aurelian. "But they looked good, didn't they? Fool most anybody anywhere."

"Philip, he admits it," Sugar said in sorrow. "The scoundrel admits he cheated me, a poor storekeeper trying to turn a honest dollar."

"It ain't honest any more after you've turned it. I'll bet you've sold that team already."

"Well, not exactly. I—uh—I—"

"What *did* you do with 'em, Sugar?"

"I traded 'em to Ruff Lanigan for twenty-two head of two-year-old steers."

Aurelian stared pop-eyed. "Ruff Lanigan?"

"Well, Ruff's foreman. The Flying H wanted a heavy team."

"Traded 'em to the Flyin' H!" Aurelian strode hurriedly to Sugar Roebuck and wrung his hand with such force that the storekeeper squeaked. "Bless you for those words, Sugar. I'll never think unkindly of you again. You've got a vein of unconscious humor that brings tears to my eyes. Twenty-two head of two-year-olds! And they're worth ten apiece anyhow anywhere! This is too much!"

Aurelian drew the back of his hand across his streaming eyes and returned to Philip's assistance.

"It's all right to holler and yell and laugh like a jackass, Reely, but I wouldn't go bumpin' into my mules' hindquarters any more'n I could help if I were you. They won't stand everything."

Aurelian dodged backward barely in time to escape a kick that, had it landed, would have driven him through the fence, and staggered across to the storekeeper. "Sugar, lemme shake your hand again."

"G'way from me!" snarled Sugar Roebuck, hastily backing away. "You're plumb *ruined* my fingers already! Philip, c'mon over when you get time. That don't mean you, Reely, not till you're sober."

Aurelian watched the retreating back of the storekeeper with indignation. "He thinks I'm drunk, the terrapin, and I ain't had a snifter to-day. But we'll change all that, won't we, Philip? It's on me."

III

"Four hundred head!" exclaimed the sheriff.

Aurelian nodded. "Most of 'em Lazy S's and some Drag R's. They were turned over by eight mighty hard-lookin' citizens to Granado Tomatero and some Mexican punchers."

"Tomatero, huh? He's foreman for Don Floristo Florero Arbusto Jasmin."

"Yep. Across the river from Santa Inez."

"They're gone then."

"Not yet. Yeah, I know Don Floristo has never coughed up a stolen herd yet, so this will be a new experience for him."

The sheriff stared at Aurelian as though he (Aurelian) were slightly touched in the brain. "Huh?"

"I got the notion how to go about it when I saw where the bunch was headed, but I was worried, kind of, for fear the cattle might have gone to some *haciendado* west of the mountains and south of the lakes. That would mean harder work and more of it. But right across from Santa Inez—fine!"

"There's a Mexican garrison right across from Santa Inez too."

"They won't bother us or Don Floristo. Why should they?"

"I can't go down in Texas, Reely, or Old Mexico either. You know that."

"A hot trail makes all the difference."

"This ain't a hot trail."

"You can call it that, can't you?"

The sheriff caressed a stubbly chin. "We—ell—what's your plan, Reely?"

Aurelian told him.

The sheriff considered, then he laughed. "I wish you luck, Reely."

"You mean you wish us both luck. Now wait a shake, Sheriff. You're runnin' for office again next year."

"I might."

"Ruff Lanigan is going to run in opposition."

The sheriff unkinked his back in surprise. "Ruff's goin' to run!"

"Just between you and me, Shotgun. I got the informa-

tion pretty straight. He's layin' pipe already. You'd like to beat him out, wouldn't you?"

"I'd rather win over him than anybody," the sheriff declared frankly.

"Here's your chance. Gettin' this herd back out of Mexico would make you so solid with the party you couldn't be pried loose."

"But this is *your* plan, Reely. You'd get the credit."

"I want the cows, not the credit. You can have that."

"Where'd you get your information about Don Floristo Florero and so forth?"

"A fat little bird with pink whiskers told me."

"H-m-m-m. I wonder. You vouching for it?"

"Sure do."

"You're actin' right clever to me, Reely."

"It's half-and-half. You'll help me get the cows back. I think, Sheriff, if you got a few representative men in this posse it would be a good thing—fellahs with influence that would spread the good word around, fellahs that would understand how you've got the welfare of your constituents so much at heart that you don't hesitate to go right down in Mexico after stolen goods. That's the sort of thing that's appreciated by the folks at home, Shotgun. Speakin' for ourselves, George and I, we'll play it up strong, you bet. Did you ever stop to think, Sheriff, how folks are a lot like sheep? Tell 'em a thing often enough and they'll believe it so hard you can swing 'em any way you like."

The sheriff pondered. He had a good deal of faith in Aurelian O'Riley and his ability to achieve the impossible in a novel manner. Maxwell realized well enough that since the episodes of Cahoon's banishing and the squashing of Four Ace Dineen, Aurelian's standing in the community had assumed the stability and proportions of a large boulder in a flat land. The successful outcome of the bet with Cal Collins had done him no harm, either. As

a rule men listened favorably when he spoke. The sheriff longed with a great longing to be reëlected. If the stolen herd should be recovered it would make him solid as a sod house with the noble army of voters.

"I'll go you, Reely," said Sheriff Maxwell.

"Good enough, Shotgun, but if I were you, I wouldn't tell the posse about my scheme—your scheme she is now —until I come back from across the river."

"Not a word, Reely, not a word. Leave it to me. What's your plan?"

IV

At the appointed time George strolled into Old Man Brown's Place on Texas Street in El Paso and met Minnesota Thompson and Dick. The foreman and his puncher were as uncheerful as wet cats. "Howdy, boys," was George's greeting; "those horses I told you about are in Bragley's wagon yard. Let's go."

"Where's Reely?" demanded Minnesota, when they were in the street, "and what horses are you talking about?"

"There might have been somebody listening," said George. "The—uh—horses were for them to ride. I'm taking you to Reely now."

"What's the matter with Reely?"

"He's all right. Only he doesn't want to know you officially."

"Officially?"

"You got the idea."

"I haven't," denied Minnesota. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, and I ain't any too sure you do."

"Yeah? We'll see. Here's the hotel. Just follow me right in like you're used to civilization."

They obeyed, and George conducted them down a cor-

ridor to a corner room whose sole occupant was Aurelian, smoking a cigarette upon the bed.

He rose at their entrance, waved them to the bed, and hitched a chair confidentially to Minnesota's right hand. George sat on the window sill, his eye on the sunlit street and those that passed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

OVER THE RIVER

I

"I'LL need a li'l help now," said Aurelian to himself, when George and the others had gone, and went to call upon a friend of long standing who was engaged in the business of buying and selling cows, real estate, insurance, or what have you.

"James, g'mornin'," was Aurelian's greeting, after he had carefully closed the office door. "I've changed since you saw me last. I am now a young man from the East, who aims to start a li'l ranch somewhere or other. My name is Johnny Wiley, and I want to look like a fool and his money."

"You look more'n usual foolish now," said friend James, "and your language fits."

"But my money don't. Want to borrow some. Four hundred will be enough. You got any ain't workin'?"

"You bet. Will four hundred be enough? You don't want to run short. Gamblin's likely to play hell sometimes."

"Ain't it the truth? But four hundred will do fine."

"Fair enough." James went to a safe in a corner and proceeded to fiddle with the combination.

"Thanks," said Aurelian, when the money had been bestowed about his person. "Do I look wealthy like an Easterner?"

"Not very," replied his friend. "You look like a cowman. What you need is a shave, yellow leggin's, a gold watch, a new carved pistol holster, basket-stamped anyhow, and a wool hat."

"Not a wool hat!" implored Aurelian.

"A wool hat," insisted James, entering into the spirit of the occasion.

"Well, if you say so, but I never thought to see the day."

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't you tell, and I won't."

"Humph. I suppose I'll be bailing you out by tomorrow unless— You want to pin it right in your new wool hat, Reely, I mean Johnny Wiley, that there is no bail for murder, highway robbery, or holdin' up trains."

"That reminds me, have you a extra good shotgun? Something real sporty-lookin'? I think it would help my disguise."

"You're fixin' for somethin' desperate, Reely. I can see that."

"Just so you don't talk about it, you're welcome."

"Not a word, Reely. Come back about five and I'll have the gun for you. Shells?"

"About forty. Say, is Floristo Florero Arbusto Jasmin particular friends with anybody in Santa Inez?"

"Porfirio Vigil knows the old scoundrel like a blood brother."

"Fair enough. So long."

Thereafter Aurelian went shopping. With a twice-over shave upon his face and a bundle enfolding the yellow leggins in one hand, a paper bag containing the wool hat in the other, he entered a pawnshop and asked to be shown some watches. He picked out a hunting-case timepiece of gold. The case, back and front, was chased around the rim with a design of conventional roses. Inside the front cover were initials, four of them divided in pairs by what was apparently a word. But both word and initials were indecipherable to Aurelian. He was not familiar with Black Letter as exemplified in the first edition of the Boke of St. Albans and other early works

of literature. The watch had no chain, so he bought one, Dickens style, with a heavy seal. Draped across his vest the gold chain made a striking appearance. A tray of steel-bowed blue-lensed spectacles caught his eye. He bought a pair.

That evening a cowman rode out of El Paso into the hills where, beside a spring that bubbled upward to the air from beneath a limestone ledge, he met three men. It was a pleasant spot, ideal for a camp, one would have supposed, but it was not for such as these, for they courted no observation. A spring, any spring in the Southwest, is visited more or less by transients. Hence the three men had a camp half a mile farther back in the hills, in a secluded nook where a campfire could not easily be discovered by any eye, however naked. To this camp the cowman was conducted and made welcome.

"George," said the cowman, "did you have any trouble finding the right kind of saddle and horse?"

"I had plenty to do," replied George. "I couldn't get a flapjack saddle anywhere, but I found me a Morgan with brass stirrups final in a livery stable. It'll have to do."

"It will," said Aurelian. "The brass stirrups take the curse off."

"The horse I got from Old Man Brown. His wife rides him. Mount him either side, or climb on from the tail, he's that gentle."

Aurelian nodded. "You understand the rest of it, boys?"

"Four days from to-day, Dick and I are to meet Bill Jackson in Old Man Brown's place," said Minnesota. "Bill will take us to the sheriff and the posse, and we're to bring them here and wait until George comes."

"George, speak your piece."

"In three days," parroted George, "I'm to ride down the river to Santa Inez and wait for you."

"Go to the head of the class, every one of you.

Teacher's hungry. Is that coffee in that pot, or do my ears deceive me?"

II

Aurelian had ridden into camp that night a cowman. In the dawning he rode out a yellow-legged tenderfoot, blue-spectacled, wool-hatted, a shotgun across his thighs, and carrying a limber switch instead of a quirt. He wore no spurs. As a whole his appearance pleased him.

Late in the afternoon, for he did not hurry, he wandered dustily into the *placita* of Santa Inez, and spent the night. He spent money too in order to properly launch a beautiful friendship with one Porfirio Vigil, the great man of Santa Inez.

In the morning the friendship was further cemented over a bottle of *mescal* under a grape arbor behind the adobe of Porfirio Vigil. The latter had a fashion of throwing his head back while he drank and gazing raptly, while the fiery liquor drenched his palate, through the crosspieces of the arbor into the blue. Aurelian was duly grateful for this mannerism on the part of his *amigo,* since it gave him an opportunity to pour unobserved his share of the *mescal* upon the ground at the base of Porfirio's choicest vine. The señor was to wonder later why that particular Red Frontagnac should languish and die.

Señor Porfirio was no whit less impressed by his new friend's capacity for liquor than he was by his conversation. He had, it seemed, this Señor Wiley, owned a sugar plantation in Cuba, which accounted for his excellent Spanish. The plantation he had recently disposed of at a good profit, which accounted for the elegant gold watch and chain adorning the waistcoat of the young man, the beautiful, gold-mounted, pearl-handled six-shooter in the brand-new carved leather holster hanging from his belt, the fine English shotgun that leaned against an upright of

the arbor, and the free-and-easy manner he employed in mentioning the large sums of money that could be made in the East. It was unfortunate that his health had forced him to come West where opportunities for money-making were so few. Señor Wiley lamented the fact at some length.

Señor Porfirio licked his full lips. He loved money—gold for choice, but silver would do. Ah, yes, 'dobe dollars are a blessing in one's old age. Here was a plump pigeon. What a shame if he, Señor Porfirio Vigil, whose ancestors in the dim and misty past had been hidalgos of old Spain, could not contrive to separate this plump pigeon from a fistful or two of feathers. Señor Porfirio tossed off another tumblerful of *mescal* on the strength of it.

Tentatively he broached the subject of Opportunity along the Rio Grande. He submitted with respect that one could make as much money in the West as in the East, or Cuba, or anywhere else in the world. Here was free range, thousands upon thousands of square miles of it. "Gaze, Señor, upon the free range, and not many cattle on this side of the river, you perceive."

Johnny Wiley perceived—doubtfully. "But you have not much rain, *amigo*."

Señor Porfirio beat upon the table with a clenched fist. His chest expanded, his throat swelled, his eyes flashed fire. "You have not been long in this land, I take it, Señor?"

"Two months."

"Ah, I thought so. You have not had time to be wetted, soaked, swept away in fact, by the so furious rains of the autumn. Señor, it is ever thus. The East is jealous of us. It does not wish people to leave it and come to us. It desires to throttle us, therefore it maligns us, calls our land a desert, and says we have no rain!" Emotion overcame the honest Porfirio. He wiped the moisture from his eyes with the back of an unclean hand. "Ah, my friend, it is

spring now, but already the grass comes. You should see it in June, in July, in *August.*" Porfirio's voice rose to a thick shriek, for he was a fat man. "All, all due to the autumn rains, which store themselves in the ground to provide for the grass in the summer. You speak of money"—business of bated breath—"here, I give you the opportunity." And the altruist waved his hand in the manner of one bestowing largesse upon mankind.

"You interest me strangely," said Señor Wiley, stirred to the depths, as was apparent by his open mouth and wide eyes. "But this opportunity of which you speak—what is it?"

"Cattle, Señor. Beef cattle which will fatten well in these little hills."

"You mean I may start a ranch?"

"May? Must, rather. It would be a sin to overlook this opportunity to become rich, and as you wax wealthy, regain that blessing of God, your excellent health."

Señor Wiley's blue-spectacled eyes looked vaguely around the grape arbor. He hoped his host would not remark the dampness of the earth at the base of the nearest vine. He shifted his feet so that they covered the wet spot. "But—but where can I obtain the cattle?"

"Heaven sent you to me, Porfirio Vigil, the one man in this country capable to advise you and place your feet in the path to health and riches. I have a friend, Don Floristo Florero Arbusto y Jasmin, a great ranch owner over the river. He has cattle to sell. I will introduce you. Also I myself will sell you a fine residence not six miles east of this place. True, the roof is fallen in somewhat, and the corrals require a few poles. But these are small matters. I will arrange for the necessary repairs."

III

Johnny Wiley, riding the range with white-whiskered Don Floristo, was not greatly taken with Chihuahua cattle.

He had, he said, a liking for red-and-white animals. They made such a handsome appearance in the sunshine. Don Floristo was too polite to smile. He agreed with the boy. But the white whiskers waggled. It might be that he was licking his lips. The Don informed his guest that he had some four hundred head of the desired colors. But they were back in the hills at present. If it pleased the Señor Wiley they would return to the ranch, where Señor Porfirio was awaiting them in the cool *patio,* and he would send men to drive in the herd on the morrow, when Señor Wiley could inspect them at his leisure. Would this please the Señor? It would, it would indeed!

Behold then, on the morrow, Señor Johnny Wiley, his gold watch chain glittering in the sunlight, riding through a herd of some three hundred and fifty steers and heifers bearing the Lazy 8 brand and about fifty similar genders branded R Triangle. Although cows to the uninitiated are alike as peas, Señor Wiley experienced no difficulty in identifying a good many that were accustomed to water regularly at both the Lazy S and the Drag R.

The Lazy S brand had been worked over with some care. Lightly the iron had followed the old brand so as to sear it fresh and thus give the effect that the entire blotted brand had been burned at the same time. Changing the Lazy S to Lazy 8 had been a simple matter. The rustlers had merely reversed the S, laid it over the original and joined the ends.

With no knowledge of the circumstances, even an inspector might have been fooled. But the thieves had not been too meticulous. They had brazenly altered the Lazy S earmarks to a staple fork the right and the left grubbed. Grubbing either ear, as every one knows, is never the work of honest men.

The Drag R brand was as susceptible to change as the Lazy S. Having run the iron over the old brand, the rustlers had drawn two converging lines from the inner and

outer ends of the Drag and made it a triangle. The Drag R earmarks, swallowfork right and left, were now crops, deep to be sure, but crops for all that.

Both brands and earmarks naturally were still unhealed. Señor Wiley in his innocence mentioned this fact.

"But yes," agreed Don Floristo blandly. "They were unbranded cattle from Sonora where I bought them recently from the noble Don Colorado Azul."

Señor Wiley swallowing this statement without a flicker, Don Floristo went on to say that he had branded the cattle with two of his own brands, of which he possessed several. He did not offer to explain why he used two brands for the same bunch of unbranded cattle. Nor did Señor Wiley delve further into the mysteries. A singularly gullible young man, this one.

Much *mescal* was drunk that evening in the *patio* of Don Floristo Florero Arbusto y Jasmin. Why not? One should make merry when an excellent bargain has been consummated and everyone is pleased.

Señor Wiley, who had been careful after the first sip of *mescal* to follow his custom of pouring the liquor on the nearest plant, in this case an azalea that was never to be the same thereafter, was overcome before ten o'clock. Indeed he fell into sodden slumber with his head on the table and was tenderly put to bed by his host and Señor Porfirio.

The bed being near a window Señor Wiléy could hear every word that was spoken in the patio.

"A *plump palomo, amigo,*" were almost the first words of Don Floristo after he and Señor Porfirio had resumed their seats at the table.

"A gift from heaven," concurred his friend.

"Of a surety, yes. I have done a good stroke of business this day."

"I too—yesterday. I sold him that ranch of mine that no one would buy because the water is bad even for the

animals, for five thousand dollars. Not *pesos. Dollars!* Ah, I expire!"

"I also. Fifteen dollars a head for the cattle. Figure it to yourself. The stolen cattle I bought for three *pesos,* not dollars."

"Cattle which you will steal back before the moon changes."

"Naturally, my friend. Do you think he will stand to buy another herd?"

"One can but try."

"One can. What a joke!"

"What a fool! To-day, with his *escopeta de dos cañones* he shot at, missing always, the quail. And the little blue quail, he called them partridges. Ha-ah! Think you he sleeps sound?"

"*Por Dios,* he is too drunk to do anything else. Hark to the snoring of the pig! Does it not do your heart good to cheat a gringo?"

"Say nothing and pass the *mescal.*"

"Has he given you any money down?"

"Not yet, but I am not worrying. If he had bargained, yes. But when a rich *hombre* like this questions not the price but says 'yes, yes,' to everything, I do not worry. *Valgame Dios,* no, not I."

"I think it is all right too. Particularly as he has agreed to have the money in gold at the ranch you sold him when I deliver the cattle. Yet I shall take precautions. I, Don Floristo Florero Arbusto y Jasmin, am not to be caught napping by any American with weak eyes. I shall take ten stout men with the cattle. He will do well to play no tricks."

IV

The following afternoon Señor Wiley, conversing with Señor Porfirio under the cottonwoods in the square of

Santa Inez, was approached by a down-at-the-heels American who had been hanging around town for a day or two. The American inquired of Señor Wiley as to the likelihood of getting a job in the vicinity. Señor Wiley was sorry, but he knew of no vacant job. He himself was starting a ranch, and in time might have an opening, but at present he was employing only Mexicans. Don Porfirio smiled inwardly at this, for were not the employees-to-be of his *gente? Valientes* who would deal faithfully with a wealthy gringo who knew no better than to pay four prices for everything.

"Tell you what, stranger," said Johnny Wiley, "I'm ridin' to El Paso to-morrow. Suppose you ride in with me. I don't know anybody only my bankers. But maybe they'd know of a job."

The ragged cowboy, volubly protesting his gratitude, withdrew.

"Be careful, my friend," said Señor Porfirio, when the American was out of earshot. "He has the appearance of a bandit, that fellow. Should he rob you—"

"He will regret it," "Señor Wiley rejoined courageously. "I fear nothing."

"But you will not let him return with you and the money, day after to-morrow?"

"I will not. My bankers will send guards with the money. Two men, at least."

"Two will be enough. For no one knows the money is coming except Don Floristo and me. I trust it will not inconvenience my friend to pay me in cash also?"

"Was it not agreed that I should do so? Indeed, yes. You and Don Floristo will be paid together."

"*Bueno!* I will ride out with Don Floristo and the cattle. We will be there in the afternoon."

"Not before then?"

"How can it be sooner? It is a day's drive from the ranch of Don Floristo to your *hacienda.* Was it not

agreed that Don Floristo should start at dawn day after tomorrow?"

"So it was. Señor, you are always right. I am grateful. I shall not forget it."

Señor Porfirio, his hand on his heart, unbelted his profoundest bow. Señor Wiley! *Que hombre!* What a man!

That night the best gamecock of Señor Porfirio disappeared into the unknown.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"LADRONES!"

I

TOWARD sunset on the following day, Señor Wiley, sitting on a broken bench outside the doorway of the tumble-down 'dobe Don Porfirio expected to sell him, saw dust drifting upward beyond a swag between two small hills. Two other men were squatting on the ground, their backs against the wall. One of them glanced sidewise at Señor Wiley. "Here they come," he observed.

"I see 'em. Your plan's workin' fine, Sheriff."

"Seems to be."

"It'll work all right," said the third man. "Bright scheme, Sheriff. I don't know how you came to think of it."

"I don't know either, Bill," the sheriff admitted candidly, if shamefacedly.

"I tell you the boys won't forget it. You can be sheriff as long as you like."

Señor Wiley stood up, stretched, walked to the corner of the house, and gazed upon the landscape. "Peaceful as a church. You wouldn't notice a thing out of the way, not a thing."

Hazy shapes of cattle and riders appeared in the dust that filled the swag as with a thin mist. "Guess I'll put on my spectacles," said Señor Wiley.

"We'd better join the rest of the bunch," said the sheriff. "C'mon, Bill."

Señor Wiley mounted his horse and went out to meet the herd.

"Twelve men," he muttered, as the drag debouched from the swag. "He ain't takin' any chances, Don Floristo ain't. I wonder maybe if he trusts me complete."

He trotted to where a white beard waggled behind the head of a red horse and a fat body slouched upon the back of a white one. "Ohé, *amigos!* a warm day."

"But yes, Señor," assented Don Floristo, and waved a hand. "You see your animals."

Señor Wiley bowed. "The price awaits you. I have provided refreshment. Call your men, Don Floristo. We will all drink to our better acquaintance. The herd will not run away if left unattended?"

"The cattle are too tired. They will drink of the water, and pass the night in the neighborhood. To-morrow they will scatter out into the hills where the good grass grows. But you will count them to-day, yes? I would have you satisfied on the tally."

"Have I not your word, Don Floristo, as to the full count? It is sufficient. Call in your men. We will drink in the shade behind the house."

"You overwhelm me with kindness, Señor."

Don Floristo brandished an arm and shouted. The men, and a precious outfit of rascals they were, rode to him. Led by Granado Tomatero, they fell in behind Señor Wiley, Don Floristo and Señor Porfirio.

"I see no guards," said Don Floristo when they drew near the house.

"I sent them back," said Señor Wiley, turning his vague blue-spectacled eyes on the Don. "What have I to fear in this place? Am I not with friends?"

Ah, the courtesy of Señor Wiley! It was a shame to take the money!

So, talking and laughing together, the cavalcade rode up to the adobe. The riders dismounted and were conducted by Señor Wiley around to one side of the house where, between an old wall that had once been part of

another house, and a discouraged cottonwood, a keg with half a dozen tin cups on its round top sat in solitary state.

"Señor Tomatero and friends," said Senor Wiley, indicating the keg, "help yourselves. For us," he whispered to the Don and Señor Porfirio, "I have brought three bottles of the best."

The men were drinking. Señor Wiley and his two *amigos* were drinking. There were toasts and merry laughter when, sharp and clear as the crash of a buffalo gun, came the road-agent word of greeting, the word whose meaning is always thoroughly and instantaneously grasped even by those who do not readily understand ordinary English: "Hanzup!"

"Ladrones!" squealed Señor Wiley, shooting his hands aloft with such force that he splattered a glassful of *mescal* into the eyes of Don Floristo. The worthy Don, blinded by the liquor, was not so overcome by the pain as not to toss up his hands with the others. But he missed seeing the spectacle they saw—twenty men, bandanas concealing their features from slightly beneath the eyes downward, sighting Winchesters across the wall.

Four men detached themselves from the force lining the wall. Six-shooters in hand they moved swiftly among the prisoners and took away their weapons. Then they proceeded to tie them hand and foot with their own ropes, taken for that purpose from their saddles. Señors Wiley and Vigil and Don Floristo, who were among the first to be separated from their firearms, were among the last to be approached for binding purposes. It was at this pass in the lamentable affair that a most tragic occurrence took place.

The bandits had laid hands upon Señor Porfirio and Don Floristo, the latter cursing them heartily in Spanish and assuring them of the fate he would have dealt out to them had he been able to use his eyes, when Señor

Wiley, shouting that he would go for assistance, suddenly fled. Poor fellow, he did not reach the horses. Indeed, he had not turned the corner of the house when one of the brutal bandits fired a single shot. Señor Wiley uttered a shriek, stumbled, fell, rolled over and, writhing in agony, died on the spot.

The horrible sight was almost too much for the stomach of Señor Porfirio, impressing as it did upon his perception the painful fact that he had lost the sale of his ranch.

In the twilight Señor Porfirio, Don Floristo and the ten Mexicans were marched past the body of Señor Wiley (a sight to wring the heart!) to the corrals where each man was bound firmly to a post.

Early in the morning the captives heard two of the bandits discussing in Spanish the advisability of removing the dead.

"Two at least of our own people are in this!" Señor Porfirio moaned bitterly to Don Floristo. "Can you move?"

"*Carrajo,* not a sacred fraction of an inch!"

Early next morning, in the faint light of early dawn, they heard the bandits yelling in the distance. Cows bawled, horses galloped about. The herd was moving off. Aie! What sorrow!

"Our horses too!" wailed Don Floristo.

"Our horses are here," Granado Tomatero, twenty posts away, growled comfortingly. "I can see them tied out in the mesquite."

Not until the morning of the following day were the captives found and freed of their bonds by a passing herder of goats. None of them was capable of standing up when released. Their numbed limbs gave way. They fell and lay without movement.

Their first act when they were able to walk was to seek the body of Señor Wiley. It was gone, but there upon

the ground, crying aloud to heaven for vengeance, was his blood for all to see.

"Ah, *pobrecito!*" mourned Señor Porfirio. "All that money. Perhaps—but it cannot be. They must have taken it."

Search was made. But not so much as a 'dobe dollar did they find. The calamity was complete.

"You will follow them, Don Floristo?" inquired Señor Porfirio, gazing upon the broad track of the stolen herd leading into the north.

"I will not," Don Floristo declared firmly. "They are far north of the Texas line by this time. This is a bad business. Murder is not a venial sin, like stealing cattle or buying a stolen herd. It is a high crime. The wealthy young Señor Wiley is dead and his money is gone with the cattle. The young man was no *peon* or cowboy, that his death should pass unremarked. His bank will make inquiry. The accursed rangers will call upon you, Porfirio, because you were often seen in his company."

"That is true. But why—"

"Do you not see that we may be blamed—that the American authorities may accuse us of this vile murder? I shall be in Mexico, but you live in Texas."

"Oh, oh, what did I ever do—"

"Say nothing. Go to Santa Inez and live in peace. I return to my *hacienda* and can answer for the tongues of my men. But you must trust in your patron saint if the rangers come."

"I would prefer to pay you a visit for a time, Don Floristo."

"Perhaps that would be better. You are afraid. I can see you are. You would babble and lie and perhaps even incriminate me to the rangers, and representations might be made to Papa Porfirio down in Mexico City. Our reputations are not of the best, and it would cost us both a great deal of money in bribes to prove our innocence."

"Let us go away from this place, Don Floristo. Let us go at once!"

II

"Which I'll never pay a bet more willing," observed Minnesota, riding the drag with Aurelian and George.

"Half the bet goes, no more," said Aurelian. "I said I'd take off half. No, that's all right. Half it is. I got enough fun out of it to pay me ten times over."

"Yeah, you got the fun all right," grunted George. "I had to do the dirty work. That game rooster I stole off ol' Vigil like to pecked a hand off me."

"We had to have him, George. Sure bled wonderful, didn't he? I made a right good job of dyin', myself, seems to me."

Minnesota rocked in his saddle. "It was all I could do to keep from bustin' after I fired, Reely. One more wiggle out of those legs of yours and I would have. I never saw a fellah pass out more active."

"Ol' sheriff's tickled to death. It'll elect him sure. Ruff's due to be disappointed."

"Yeah, it was a bright scheme of Maxwell's," said Minnesota. "I wonder if he thought it up himself."

"We're playin' it thataway," Aurelian said evenly. "Don't let anybody tell you different, Minnesota."

"I see and—I won't."

"That's the idea. Here's where I leave you, Minnesota, for a spell. Got to go to El Paso and return this gun and get back my own horse and saddle. I'll catch up before you're past the Jarillas. Comin', George?"

III

"What you want in here, Reely? This is a jewelry store."

"So the sign says. Here, take the shotgun, George. I'll meet you down at the corner."

Naturally George was right at his elbow when he asked the clerk to show him some diamond engagement rings. Aurelian, having resumed his customary apparel, the clerk eyed him with the disdain the white-collared are accustomed to feel for those in less fortunate circumstances. Suppressing a yawn with the back of a white hand, the clerk brought forth a tray of decidedly meretricious jewelry.

"Very nice engagement rings," said the clerk. "Cheap too. Please any lady."

Aurelian stared at the yellow, flawed Brazilians with high disfavor. He stared at the clerk with even higher disfavor.

"Don't lift your hand to it," murmured George. "You can tell it was raised a pet."

"Sir?" The clerk gave George such a look.

"Sir Walter," slipped in Aurelian. "Scott is the last name. They let him out yesterday."

The clerk goggled at Aurelian. "Let him out?"

"Jail. He was in for reckless shooting. Ol' judge said if he'd killed anybody he'd have given him a year. But he only downed a jewelry clerk, so seven days was the limit for that kind of game. The shotgun he's carryin' now is the very weapon. You got any engagement rings —real ones?"

The clerk gulped and became a salesman.

"Reely," said George, on their way to the office of James, "if I ever get so far gone as to blow all that money on a one-diamond ring for a girl I'll blow out my brains."

"That's nothing."

"You bet I'd—*Say,* lookit here, Reely! I've got more and better brains than you ever thought of having!"

"The difference is, I use mine. Here's the office, George,

and here's James. Our own James pushin' his stomach ahead of him, all so fat and sassy. Howdy, James. G'on back in and take your shotgun away from George before he ruins it. Nice gun, James. Did some of the best shootin' of my life with it."

"What did you get?"

"Nothin'. That's why it was such good shootin'."

"Crazy, like always," observed James wearily. "What a well-grown lad George is."

"Ain't he shootin' up? Smokes and cusses just like a regular man. Oh, I've brought him up right, James. He'll be a credit to me yet."

"Hates himself, don't he?" grinned George. "He thinks he's a big citizen since he got engaged."

"No! Our Reely! Is the lady blind, Reely?"

"Here's ten dollars of what I borrowed, James," Aurelian dodged hastily. "Send you the rest."

"That's all right. Is George tellin' the truth about you?"

"Sure is," Aurelian avowed manfully.

"Well, now, that's great. Better come live here in town. We've got a fine growin' city, and when capital comes in watch the boom. I can sell you a nice li'l house up on the Mesa. You'd enjoy it here, Reely, and so would the wife. Womenfolks like a town. A ranch is lonely. We got some Rosebud folks here too. Two-three families moved down in the last year or so. Single fellahs from Rosebud drift in and out all the time. Had to put one of 'em in jail a couple of months ago."

"Yeah? Who?"

"Fellah named Hard, Jack Hard. Knifed another fellah used to live in Rosebud. Mexican named Pancho Barro. Ordinarily we'd overlook a li'l thing like that. But Jack didn't use any judgment. Had to pull off his fraycas right in the plaza. Lot of women around. Mexican, he pulled a gun, throwed down on Hard and killed another Mexi-

can—luckily. Might just as well have been one of the lady folks. Ol' judge gave Hard forty-five days. He had to make an example of somebody."

"Why didn't he jail Pancho?"

"I expect he would have—ol' judge is mighty decent thataway—only Pancho was too dead to jail. That Hard is one survigorous knife-fighter."

"I don't know any fellah named Hard who ever lived in Rosebud."

"Neither did I. But I used to see him there every time I was in town on that business for the Triangle E. I think he was a tinhorn or something."

"Some fellahs are always gettin' in jail more or less," said Aurelian indifferently. "C'mon out and have a smile, James."

When they parted from James two saloons down the block, George, in turning, caught the rowel of one spur in the crack between two planks of the sidewalk and snapped the spur off at the neck.

"Serves you right for buyin' cheap spurs," said Aurelian. "You never would buy you a handmade pair like a regular cowman."

"I will now. No, not in here, Reely. Do you think I aim to be robbed? I ain't any millionaire like you, winning bets all over the place every time you turn around. I'll go to a pawnshop. Get me an extra good pair of silver mounteds for half the money."

Aurelian conducted his brother to the pawnshop on El Paso Street where he had bought his watch. The pawnbroker remembered Aurelian and smiled pleasantly.

"Spurs? You bet. Right this way, Mister. I got a fine assortment. Here you are. Price tags on every pair. Not like most shops, this one of mine ain't, where nothin's marked and they soak you all the traffic will stand. Odd number," the man continued to Aurelian's address, "you mind the watch I sold you? Yeah, well, the next day the

fellah that hocked it came in after it. When I told him I'd sold it, he mighty near had a fit. You never saw a feller in such a takin'. But the ticket had run out, so there wasn't any comeback. I can't hold watches overtime when I get a chance to sell one. He claimed he'd hocked it for two months. But I showed him the ticket—I always keep 'em awhile on account of fellers like him—and it was marked two weeks. He got right violent."

"Yeah?"

"Until I picked up the house pistol. Then he calmed down and talked more reasonable. He sure wanted a description of you, though."

"Give it to him?"

"Not exactly. I always protect my customers." The pawnbroker smirked virtuously.

"Know the fellah?" asked Aurelian.

"Jack Hard, he said his name was. Got in jail here a while back. Some cuttin' scrape. Hocked the watch right after he got out. Had a beard then. They don't let 'em shave on the stone pile."

"Had a beard? Then he'd shaved it off when he came in for the watch?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't have known him only for the voice. Why, there he is now!"

Aurelian turned. But he only caught a glimpse of the fellow's back and shoulder and the tip end of a hatbrim as the man, at the pawnbroker's exclamation, slid with the quickness of a cat behind a group of Mexicans flattening noses against the glass of the show window.

Aurelian, believing it well to discover who it was that appeared so anxious to avoid a meeting, ran into the street. The back and shoulders he had seen were not in sight. At the side of the pawnshop an alley yawned invitingly. Aurelian hastened to the entrance of the alley, and perceived at its other end a high board fence and a booted leg in the act of rolling over the top.

Aurelian was quick. But the man had been quicker. Aurelian, from the top of the fence, saw a wagon yard containing a green freight wagon and four mules. He ran across the yard, found the gate closed, but not barred, and looked up and down the street. But none of the backs and shoulders and legs of the passers-by resembled in any way those belonging to the man who had fled.

Aurelian returned through the yard, noting as he passed that the four mules were branded Flying V right hip, and that the wagon box under the footboard was natural wood, with home-made hasp and staple. The whole outfit had a familiar look. It was one he had seen somewhere. But then, a man sees a good many wagon outfits first and last. Aurelian gave this phase of the matter no further thought.

Who was the man who had escaped? And why had he fled? Why didn't he wish to meet Aurelian and George? Aurelian wondered if he could have been one of the outlaws who had stolen the cattle. But if he were, why had he run? There was no evidence of identity against the rustlers, and they must know it. A mere guilty conscience is not usually sufficient to cause a man of this stamp to arouse suspicion by pointedly running away.

Aurelian gave it up.

George was waiting for him in the pawnshop. "Who was he?"

"Search me. I never caught up with him."

"Jack Hard ain't wantin' to meet you, Mister. That's a cinch," offered the pawnbroker. "He heard me say 'There he is!' and ran. Maybe he thinks you're a deputy."

"Did you see those queer-lookin' letters and the worse-lookin' words inside the case?"

"Oh, I saw 'em, but they don't mean a thing to me. You neither, huh?"

Aurelian nodded. "You say you didn't describe me as the fellah who bought his watch?"

"Sure not," declared the pawnbroker. "I always protect my customers."

"All the same, I'll bet he described you, Reely," said George, when they were walking up El Paso Street toward the plaza.

"Sure he did. I'd like to know why this Jack Hard wants that watch so bad."

"Those crazy-lookin' letters and word might tell a tale if we knew what they meant. They must mean somethin'."

"Whatever it is, it's sure wearin' a good disguise."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WITH ANY AMAZEMENT

I

"Tom must be cookin' a meal for us," said George, eyeing the smoke-drift from the kitchen stovepipe of the Drag R.

"Guess he saw us comin'," said Aurelian. "Sift along, ol' sore-foots! We'll turn 'em into the corrals to-day, and shove 'em up Hembrillo to-morrow, or the day after, maybe." With an oblique glance at George.

"To-morrow," George told him with a grin. "Business before pleasure. I know you, y' ol' coffee-cooler. Won't you be seein' her all your life after next week?"

"Next month," Aurelian said stiffly. "I saw Mis' Jackson in Rosebud, and I asked her. She said she got word the minister was down sick in White Oaks, and Rosebud wouldn't see him until his next trip after."

"I suppose now you'll be takin' a week off and goin' to El Paso to be married. You might know. Just when we're due to be busy as a dog with fleas, you've got to take time off. As if—"

"Aw, shut up! We ain't goin' to El Paso. We'll wait till the minister comes to Rosebud. I know I can't go away now, and you ought to know I wouldn't when Ruff and Cal are liable to push the bridge over any minute."

"Gawd bless 'em, they're waitin' for us!" exclaimed George.

Sure enough. Standing at the kitchen door as the two brothers hazed the little bunch of R Triangle cattle into the stockaded wings that fanned out from the gate of the outer corral were Ruff and Cal.

Aurelian took occasion to ride closer to George. "If

they don't know, I'm going to tell 'em. You better begin cleaning your saddle gun right soon."

George winked broadly and dismounted to open the gate.

"Been buyin' cattle, I see," said Ruff, as the two brothers approached the kitchen door. Cal had gone back into the kitchen.

"Not exactly," said Aurelian, staring into Ruff's eyes. "It's a bunch was rustled from us along with about three hundred and fifty head belongin' to the Lazy S."

Ruff's eyes evinced nothing but sincerest interest. "Yeah? Who rustled 'em?"

"We don't know—yet."

"The rustlers had sold 'em, huh?"

"Yep."

"Well, you're lucky to get 'em back. Lazy S get theirs back too?"

"You betcha."

"That's fine. Everybody happy. It doesn't always turn out that way. We've been waitin' for you since this mornin'. Saw your dust, so we built us all a meal."

"I built a meal, you mean," came in a jocular rumble from the kitchen. "You ain't any cook."

"That's true," Ruff laughed. "Cal's a real one, most as good as lady folks. All he needs is an apron."

The meal passed pleasantly enough. Ruff and Cal did not broach the reason for their call, but they were mightily intrigued with the subject of the rustled cattle, and asked many questions. Yet their questions were neither so pointed nor so apt as to suggest in any way that they knew more that met the ear.

After dinner George took his saddle gun from the corner where it leaned, sat down on the step leading to the storeroom and began to clean the weapon. His position was at one side and a trifle to the rear of Ruff and Cal, who, their chairs braced against the edge of the table,

had tipped back their chairs and were smoking cigarettes.

Aurelian was not smoking. He sat facing the two guests, his chair on four legs and at least a yard away from the table.

"It's a wonder Maxwell was willing to go down in Texas," said Ruff.

"It was his own idea, Ruff," explained Aurelian. "He wanted to get the cattle back, and he figured a good way to do that was to go and get 'em. You know how it is: Always do a thing yourself if you want it done right."

"It's a wonder the Texas sheriff let him do it. Or did the *Tejanos* help him?"

"They didn't know anything about it, I guess. Leastways, they didn't bother us any. Of course Maxwell took off his star, and crossed the line as a private citizen. That made it legal, O. K."

"And all without a shot fired."

"Aurelian smiled blandly. "There was a shot fired, one, counting from right to left, but nobody was hurt. Shotgun Maxwell seems to be makin' a right good sheriff. It ain't every law officer would be willing to take a chance like that. We might all have been arrested before we got the herd across the line, and then where would Maxwell's job be?"

"He taken a chance," agreed Cal, a puzzled frown between his heavy brows.

Ruff said nothing, but the gaze he bent upon Aurelian was most intent.

"As it is," continued Aurelian, "he figures this li'l business will just about reëlect him."

"Huh?" It was Ruff speaking.

"You see, he took along a lot of representative men on the posse, fellahs with influence, party men, good talkers who'll point out to folks how what's wanted in Rosebud County is a sheriff who's got the interests of his constituents under his vest. Folks are like sheep, Ruff, most of

'em. Talk to 'em hard enough and long enough, and you can swing 'em here and there and roundabout and hardly make 'em dizzy a-tall."

"Seems to me I've heard that before," Ruff said slowly.

"Yeah, you told me."

"Lookit here, Reely, didn't I tell you I was figurin' on runnin' for sheriff?"

"Yes, indeed." Aurelian's beaming smile was as cheerful as a spring sunrise.

"And you let Shotgun Maxwell turn a trick like this!"

"*I* let him! What are you talkin' about?"

"Don't tell me, Reely. Without he was helped, Shotgun Maxwell would never have got the idea of going down in Texas after any rustled herd. Not that lad. You ain't told me how the trick was turned, but I can guess it had to be clever, and if there's one sport in the territory capable of planning it, that feller's you."

"That's a real compliment, Ruff." Aurelian's tone was light. But he was watching Ruff and Cal like a cat.

"I thought you were working for us, Reely?"

"I didn't say so, Ruff. The folks I work for first, last and all the time are George O'Riley and Reely, his brother."

Ruff continued to stare steadily at Aurelian. The latter stared back. Both played poker well. There was silence for a space, then Cal, whose hands had been locked behind his head, dropped them and began to finger the buttons of his shirt.

"Take a look at George, Cal," said Ruff, without turning his head (it was an historical fact that very little of what went on in his vicinity escaped Ruff Lanigan).

"Is that gun cocked?" demanded Cal in a strained tone.

"I think so," replied George, industriously polishing the breech with a bit of rag. "But that's all right, Cal. I've got my finger right on the trigger."

Ruff Lanigan laughed. "You boys don't take any chances, do you?"

"Not to-day," admitted Aurelian.

"Cal," said Ruff, "we hardly need ask for the answer we came down to get to-day." Cal merely glowered in silence. "Still," went on Ruff dryly, "there's nothing like cinchin' a hull on tight. Have you seen Mis' Gordon, Reely?"

"I saw her." Aurelian's hand was at his side. "The Lazy S ain't for sale. Mis' Gordon is going to marry me."

Cal uttered an explosive snort. Ruff's eyes narrowed to slits. He looked up at the ceiling. After a long minute, a minute during which the silence in that kitchen became almost unbearable, Ruff dropped his eyes to meet and clash with Aurelian's steady stare. "I am damned," said Ruff Lanigan.

"I think so," assented Aurelian.

"You're foolish, Reely," said Ruff, "and I'm sorry. So's Cal."

"He looks it," tucked in George. "Don't you lose your temper now, Cal."

"Wait until I leave the room anyhow, Cal," said Ruff, with the humor that usually distinguished his worst moments. "If George misses you, he'll hit me sure. You'll take notice, boys, my hands are in a peaceful position. I ain't reachin' for any gun and Cal won't either."

"By G—" began Cal.

"I know it's tough, Cal," Ruff said soothingly, "but these boys mean what they look like. I always told you they did. Now there ain't a thing we can do, is there, Reely, to make you change your mind and help us out? We'd appreciate your talents, we would. You won't get a thing from Maxwell and that bunch. We'd admire to see you have some of those government contracts, and—"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. We've got some of those contracts."

"You what?"

Aurelian nodded. "After you spoke of it that day, I thought I might as well go up and see the agent. Good fellah, Squibbler. Drinks Bourbon. I—uh—I persuaded him to give me the May contract, and he was reasonable about the one in July, so I took that one too. You needn't bother your head a mite about 'em. Lanigan, not any more."

"Reely," said Ruff seriously, but without any sign of the rage that Aurelian knew must be consuming him, "I wonder if you realize what you're doing?"

"Now I'm asking you, Ruff. I wonder if you realize what you're doing?"

"Meaning?" This from Cal, when Ruff did not immediately reply.

Ruff chuckled. "No need to ask, Cal. We know what he means, and where he stands. So we might as well be joggin' along." He stood up and stretched lazily. "No chance to do business here."

"Always open for business," countered Aurelian. "But we serve customers one at a time." Ruff looked a question. "That's all George's rifle is for—so they'll step up one at a time. Sort of insurance like."

"I see." Ruff yawned elaborately.

"You and me could do business first," went on Aurelian. "Then Cal could—if he still wanted to."

"Now that's what I call generous," Ruff said heartily. "I'll think it over. Have you taken root in that chair, Cal?"

"You know," Cal said slowly, "if I could be sure—"

"But you ain't sure," Ruff interrupted swiftly. "We're goin'—*now.*"

Without another word Cal got up and followed him out.

Standing in the doorway, George, the saddle gun in the hollow of his arm, watched them with somber eyes.

"It would save us trouble if I drilled them both plumb through the shoulder blades."

"I know it would," Aurelian said wearily. "It's what they'd do. But we ain't them. I did what I could. I gave him a chance to start. Ruff wanted to be sure, I guess. And he wasn't sure."

"Lost his nerve maybe," offered George.

"I don't think so," Aurelian said judiciously. "Ruff ain't afraid, or Cal either. But they ain't takin' chances, not any chances a-tall." He sighed inwardly. Ruff and Cal were making it very hard for him. It was only too obvious that they intended to keep on with their underhanded deviltry. It was impossible to watch them all the time. If only he hadn't been such a fool as to give Peggy that promise.

"I guess womenfolks are put into the world to make it harder for the men," George said with such uncanny divination of his brother's thoughts that Aurelian gaped.

But what he said was, "Toss you to see who pumps at the lower well this afternoon."

"Ain't that my luck," mourned George when he lost. "It's hell to keep that burro moving in a wind."

"Maybe it won't come this way," said Aurelian, glancing eastward where high, wreathed columns of white dust majestically moving across the White Sands showed that that area was experiencing a blow. "Dust is traveling northeast, looks like. Better take your Winchester, George. Ruff and Cal went that way."

George returned in the glory of the sunset without having felt any wind or seen a sign of Ruff and Cal.

On the heels of George came Tom of the Lazy S.

"Our own Thomas," said Aurelian. "Cut twice as much bacon, George. We all know Tom's appetite."

"He's a gambler too. Heads I win, tails you lose."

Tom grinned sheepishly. "I sure crawled Dick's hump for that."

"Is that where you got the black eye?" asked Aurelian.

"He's got two, and I collected a tooth off him. Here it is. I'm keepin' it for a lucky piece. Letter for you, Reely. Package for you on my saddle. I'll get it after. From the boss."

Aurelian spread the letter on the table beside the lamp. It ran:

DEAR REELY:

I can't go through with it. I haven't the courage. We would not be happy. I intend to sell the ranch to the Lanigan-Collins interests. Mr. Weston is attending to this for me. I release you from your promise concerning Lanigan and Collins. You mustn't try to see me. I am sending back your gun. This is good-by.

PEGGY.

Aurelian's mental organization stood still. He couldn't believe his eyes. He read the letter again. A third time. It just couldn't be possible. But there it was in black ink on white paper. Peggy. His Peggy. The one woman in all the wide, wide world, had, there was no other phrase for it, played him false. "Mr. Weston is attending to this for me." That meant— He turned to Tom. "Seen Gabby lately, Tom?"

"He was over three days ago, Reely. Boss is fixin' to sell the ranch, I guess. He's workin' it for her."

Aurelian nodded. It was true then. He had told Ruff and Cal that very day that Mrs. Gordon was engaged to him and that the Lazy S was not for sale, when as a matter of fact, the engagement must have been broken and Weston given his orders three days previously.

Crumpling the letter he put it in the stove.

The coffee was about ready. Aurelian went out to the rainwater tank and brought back a dripping dipper.

"Hey!" bawled George. "Whatcha doin'?"

Aurelian looked up. "Huh?"

"You poured in the whole dipper, you jack!" snarled George.

Aurelian stared at George, at the coffepot, at the dipper, then without a word he carefully placed the dipper on top of the pile of mesquite chunks in the woodbox and went out to the woodpile. He returned with an armful of chunks, and was about to drop them on top of the dipper, when George rescued it, yelping, "The box is full! *What* is bitin' you, Reely?"

"I was thinkin' of somethin' else," muttered Aurelian, and let his armful fall plump on Tom's toes. "Dinner ready? I am," Aurelian said calmly. "Huh? What's that about your feet, Tom? Dropped the wood on 'em, did I? What wood?"

It was, for Aurelian, a truly awful meal.

When Tom was snoring, George went out to the gate whither Aurelian had gone immediately after supper. George was no fool. The letter, Aurelian's odd manner and actions subsequent to the reading of it, combined with his having seen Aurelian wrap the pearl-handled sixshooter in a newspaper and give it to the Lazy S boy, would have told the story to a much stupider man than George O'Riley. He climbed the rails and sat down beside his brother, took out the makings and built himself a smoke. He said nothing.

"You might as well know," said Aurelian finally. "It's all off between Peggy and me."

"If that ain't a woman all over!" grunted George. "None of 'em know their own mind."

"She knows hers."

"A fine way to treat a man! A fi-ine way. I always knew—"

"Not too strong, George," said Aurelian gently. "She —she's all right. She's got a right to be happy."

"As if you couldn't make her happy! Reely, if it was me, I'd just naturally traipse up there and arm-strong

her into marrying me. Mittening you thisaway ain't right. I wouldn't stand it."

"Yes, you would.'

"I would not. I'd show her she couldn't play off and on with me, I sure would. You try it now. Talk to her rough, treat her similar. She'll come around."

"What are you towrowin' about? I thought you didn't want her to marry me."

"We-ell, I don't like to see her treatin' you like a dog."

"She knows best, I guess."

"I give you up," returned George, and forthwith departed, swearing under his breath.

Aurelian remained motionless on the gate a long time after George had gone. At any rate, with regards to Lanigan and Collins, she had made him a free agent. He gave her that much credit. Yet, after all, what did it matter? What did anything matter? Slowly he put his hand into his pocket and drew out a small, cubical jeweler's box. He did not open it, but held it in his palm, and touched it gently with the fingers of his other hand. The starlight was very bright.

Suddenly he raised his arm. With a sweeping overhand throw he hurled the box far into the brush.

II

The two brothers sat in their saddles watching the little bunch of Triangle R cattle stamping and shoving at the Hembrillo troughs. Below them the banks above the gray-blue wash were green with the leaves of desert willows. The air was summer-hot. A little wind blew easterly from Hembrillo Basin and sang pleasantly through the branches of the piñons and junipers growing on the steep southern slope of the cañon—a slope that swept up and up between the rims to the saddle, on the other side of which lay Four Troughs Gulch. Chocolate, umber and blue, laven-

der, yellow and black, the peaks and pinnacles of the San Andreas Range lifted all about them. Eastward, where Hembrillo Cañon opened toward the plain, a lone cedar on a knoll was silhouetted vert upon argent, against the glittering stretches of the White Sands.

A scene to invite the soul. But Aurelian and George were practical men immersed at the moment in the cattle business.

"We ought to take a look at Hieroglyphic Spring while we're up here," said George. "She ain't been dug out for four months."

"She was fillin' up some the last time I was through this way," said Aurelian, lifting his reins. "But it was late and I didn't have time to stop. The Dry Cañon bunch are watering there again," he added in allusion to a bunch of Drag R saddle stock that ran in the cañon of that name.

So they rode on up Hembrillo to where Hieroglyphic Spring, guarded by two young cottonwoods, bubbled out of the gravel beneath a thirty-foot wall of black limestone upon which the Indians had painted in red the horned God of War, sundry other deities held in equal respect by their aboriginal hearts, and certain records of the chase and frontier skirmishes. It was from these rock pictures that the spring derived its name.

A few horses, the Dry Cañon bunch, were watering at the spring as the brothers came around a point of rocks. The animals moved slowly away at their approach. Aurelian's eyes narrowed as he watched them walking along the wash. "Gettin' mighty sore-footed. Look at Alizan limp. That's the worst of flat rock. Feet wear right down in the hills."

"We'll be needin' 'em come round-up too."

"Yeah, it's time the others got a rest. We'll drive 'em down and shoe 'em all around. They'll do good in the horse pasture. Spring looks pretty fair still. Guess we

won't have to dig her out after all. I'll cut 'em back, George."

"You want to watch ol' Alizan and Bay Billy passin' Dry Cañon. They're a slippery pair of scoundrels."

The horses, realizing as soon as Ploughboy stepped out that they were wanted, forgot their sore-footedness, cocked their tails and fled up the cañon, only to whirl right-about as a mounted man came out of the brush at a bend. Aurelian spurred to one side, as the other rider, taking in the situation immediately, rode across the wash to cut back Bay Billy, whose flighty equine brain impelled him to leave the bunch and essay a scramble up the side of the cañon.

Bay Billy, headed by the horseman, raced back to his friends. The horses bunched and trotted sedately down Hembrillo.

" 'Lo, Mooney," called Aurelian, riding down the slope to join the other. "More mileage, huh?"

Sheriff Mooney McGee grinned. "Caught you, y' ol' horse thief. Whose ponies you rustlin' now?"

"What you doin' trespassin' in Rosebud?" countered Aurelian.

"Short cut back to La Luz. Had extradition papers for a murderer they were holdin' for me at Aleman. Time I got there the Bar Seven boys had busted into the jail and lynched him. That's the second time they've worked that on me. Damn nuisance."

"You ought to speak to 'em about it."

"Expect I better. Speakin' serious, Reely, you want to be careful whose horses you rustle. I'd leave the Army's alone."

"What—Oh, him!" Aurelian stared as, shoe iron ringing on the rocks, a big bay horse trotted out of a side cañon and joined the bunch. The animal was branded U S on the left shoulder, C7 on the left hip. "Seventh Cavalry. Must be one of Saunders' horses."

"I thought he'd gone back to Stanton."

"Damfino. Fellah's liable to find the Army most anywhere these days. We'll put the cayuse in the horse pasture and I'll notify Stanton first chance. What else you know?"

"Nothin' much, except Cal Collins and Ruff Lanigan have taken over the Box O."

"Oh, lovely!" Aurelian's face clouded.

"I thought you'd be pleased. Yeah, and they've started their wagons out. Saw 'em when I was goin' west."

"If they've started ridin' circle already, I guess we'd better begin our roundup."

"I would." The sheriff's tone was jejune.

Aurelian imparted the news to George when he joined them after the bunch had been chivvied past Dry Cañon. George swore.

So did Aurelian the following morning when he discovered exactly three horseshoes in the blacksmith shop.

"The horses we've been ridin' all winter will play out quick on circle," said Aurelian glumly. "I'll hitch up and go to town for those shoes right away. Hey, Mooney, want a ride in on a real wagon?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"SHOOT YOU FOR FIRST BLOOD!"

I

AURELIAN O'RILEY, having patronized Sugar Roebuck to the extent of one gross of horseshoes, three sacks of groceries and two cartons of smoking tobacco, was in the act of stowing his purchases in the wagon bed when his old friend Ruidoso Red entered the wagon yard and hailed him with glee.

"I heard you were in town, old-timer. Providential, I call it. Been huntin' an excuse to lay over till to-morrow. Let's get Timbo and step out high, wide and merry-legged."

So they sought out Timbo the blacksmith, who was busy as usual, but could always find the time to oblige his friends. It was not quite four o'clock in the afternoon when the three breasted the bar of the Silver Saloon.

The space in front of the long and battered bar was fairly full. So were some of the customers. Silver Sam was busy. The high-heeled, spurred boots of cowfolks mingled on the brass rail with the soberer shoes of Rosebud citizens. But the hats of both townspeople and riders were all of the same pattern, broad and flat in the brim and not too high in the crown, as was the fashion in those days.

There was cheerful talk and laughter and tobacco smoke. Aurelian and Red and Timbo the blacksmith sipped their way through a slow three rounds. Red and Timbo were at peace with the world. But not all the whisky in Rosebud could have drowned the ghost of a dead past that rode Aurelian.

It was then that old Tom Powers from Three Rivers,

who, by virtue of six drinks from different bottles, two of which contained *tequila,* had been holding forth in his happiest vein, was moved to sing a song of his youth.

"You've heard of Julius Cæsar and the great Napoleon too,
And how the Cork Militia beat the Turks at Waterloo;
But there's a page of glory that as yet remains uncut,
And that's the martial story of Slattery's Mounted Foot.
This gallant corps was organized by Slattery's eldest son,
A bandy-legged poacher with a double-breasted gun;
And many a head was broken, and many an eye was shut,
When practicin' maneuvers with Slattery's Mounted Foot."

"Chorus, boys!" roared Powers, snapping his fingers. "All together!"

"You'd better go back to Flo's, Tom," advised a well-meaning friend, and tapped a bundle on the bartop. "I'll bet she expected those groceries two hours ago."

"I'll be doin' no such thing," retorted Powers, reverting as he always did in his cups to the accent and idiom of green Tyrone. "The groceries can wait. Is it an errand boy I am to be run hither and yon till my feet drop off at the knees? Do you think I'm afraid of my own daughter? Well, then, I am not. Chorus, now, boys!"

"And down from the mountains came the squadrons and platoons,
Four and twenty fightin' men and a couple of stout gossoons:
And when we marched behind—*My wife!*"

The song ended abruptly on a blue and sour note as old Tom Powers dived like a jackrabbit round the end of the bar.

The redoubtable Mrs. Powers stood in the doorway with her arms akimbo. Her blue eyes flashed fire and scorn upon the stricken roomful.

"Powers!" she roared in a bellow fantastically at variance with her small person. "Come out from behind that

bar! Oh, you needn't think I don't know you're there!" she pursued, when silence was the sole result of her order. "I saw your feet when you dodged! Come out, or I'll come in after you! You won't, won't you!"

Seizing the poker where it lay beneath the cold stove she jumped up on the brass rail, leaned across the bar and prodded vigorously, reiterating the while her demand that her husband produce himself. It was an edifying occasion thoroughly enjoyed by the assembled customers and several passers-by drawn to the scene by the tumult.

"She hit him that time!" Ruidoso Red whispered with delight. "Hear him grunt. *That* fetched him."

Tom Powers, his necktie over one ear, crawled into view and got to his feet. "What is it, dear?" he cooed.

"I'll 'dear' you, you sot! Go home. No, not without Flo's groceries she sent you for three hours ago. Pick 'em up, and if I ever have to come into any joint again after you, I'll make you hard to find. Here, lemme straighten your tie. Now git, and you can put down a bet you're goin' back to Three Rivers with me to-morrow!"

"Hey, you didn't pay for that last drink!" expostulated Silver Sam.

"Walk right along, Powers," said his wife, who had backed almost against Aurelian. "Lemme see you pay for any more red-eye. Lemme see you, that's all I ask!"

Tom Powers walked right along. Aurelian felt Mrs. Powers' hand brush his, felt a piece of paper pressed into his palm. Mrs. Powers wheeled to face Silver Sam. "Try and get it," she said with a sarcastic grin, and followed her husband.

Silver Sam spread helpless hands flat on the bar and achieved a wry smile. "Name it, gents. It's on the house."

"Now I wonder if there was anything else on that list," Aurelian said aloud, producing apparently from a pocket the piece of paper that Mrs. Powers had given him. There were six words printed on the paper:

Cal is in town. Look out.

"I guess I got everything," said Aurelian, slipping the note into a vest pocket. "No, not another, Red. Call it a day for me."

Red and Timbo went out with him. The three lingered near the hitch rail.

"Nothin' to do till supper time," mourned Ruidoso Red. "Too early for poker."

"Seen Cal around to-day?" Aurelian asked casually.

"I ain't seen him since the day you showed him that horse with three legs," said Timbo the blacksmith with a reminiscent chuckle.

"Guess they hurrahed him so much about that he's stayin' away for a spell." contributed Ruidoso Red.

Conversation languished. Aurelian's eyes beneath his pulled-down hat brim were very watchful. Mrs. Powers was dependable. Cal Collins was certainly in town.

A few minutes later he saw Roaring Jack Shillaber lounge out of an alley between two adobes fifty yards north and take a leisurely survey of the street and its occupants. The former county attorney built himself a cigarette, lit it, and lounged back into the alley. Aurelian moved from the hitch rail to the front wall of the Silver and set his back against it. His two friends remained with him.

An alley ran along one side of the Silver Saloon within four yards of the group of three. In the mouth of this alley a man suddenly appeared. His hand was on the butt of his sixshooter, and he was staring directly at the spot near the hitch rail where Aurelian had been standing.

"'Lo, Cal," said Aurelian blandly.

Cal Collins turned his head, saw Aurelian, noted his attitude and the position of his right hand, and grinned.

"Howdy, Reely," was his greeting as he walked toward them.

He stood in front of Aurelian, still grinning. Aurelian smelt the whisky on his breath. He had been drinking himself, but not so much as his vis-à-vis. Cal must have primed himself thoroughly to attempt a murder in broad daylight. Because that is what it would have been if Aurelian had been standing unwarned by the hitch rail. Shillaber's reconnoitering and Cal's sudden appearance presaged nothing else.

"We're goin' to be neighbors," was the next stone Cal flung into the pool.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Ruff and me we're going to take over the Lazy S—after all."

"I heard."

"We heard too—something else. Styles in mittens don't change much."

"Meaning?"

Cal favored Aurelian with another grin, but he did not elucidate. Perhaps the flaming desire to kill had died down a trifle. Perhaps—At any rate, when Aurelian with deadly calm repeated, "Meaning?" Cal rejoined merely, "Oh, nothing," and bent a bloodshot gaze on the ivory-handled six-shooter in Aurelian's holster. "Got that fancy gun, I see."

At this exhibition of bad taste the two men with Aurelian began to regard Cal with some interest. Unaware of the broken engagement they had not grasped Cal's primary *faux pas,* the allusion to mittens.

"It's the gun I asked Ruff about," Aurelian said serenely.

"How's she shoot?" Cal bulled right along.

"Fair, oh, fair."

Cal pulled out his watch and consulted it elaborately. "An hour to supper," he grunted. "Tell you what, Reely, shoot you for the drinks."

"Go you."

"'Lo, Jack," said Cal as Shillaber materialized from nowhere. "We're goin' to shoot for the drinks. Want in?"

Shillaber shook his head with a smile. "I'm not a good shot. Here's Sim. He fancies himself."

But the former election clerk insisted that he had left his gun at home. Bill Jackson and Mooney McGee drifted into the group. Cal invited them both, and both accepted. Target practice, being considered in the town of Rosebud as an act apart from a bona-fide gunplay, was a matter for arrest, incarceration and fine, so they adjourned to open ground in the vicinity of the adobe formerly occupied by Sockless Hank. Cal's manner as he walked along between Roaring Jack and lean Sim was easy as an old shoe. Yet the tension in the air was taut as a harpstring. Sheriff Mooney McGee took occasion to drop a slow eyelid at Aurelian. The latter winked back.

II

First they shot for distance. Six tomato cans were set up against the side wall of the deserted 'dobe. Roaring Jack paced off eighty yards and drew a line in the dirt with the neck of a fortuitous whisky bottle. Each contestant slipped a round into the empty chamber of his revolver cylinder, upon which as a guard against accident the hammer customarily rested.

At distance Mooney McGee was high gun. Aurelian believed he could have beaten him, but with an eye to future events, he purposely shot a little worse than Cal Collins.

"That fancy gun," said Cal with unconcealed contempt, "ain't so good—or maybe it's you."

Aurelian accepted the sneer with phlegm. "It might be me, Cal," he said equably. "You never can tell."

Cal picked up a sardine can and tossed it into the air. His right arm flew up, a flash, a tubful of smoke, and the

can which had begun to fall, flew up jerkily. Five times more Cal fired and five times the can, struck by the lead, leaped upward. His last shot whirled it aside in a short arc that ended under a mesquite bush.

This was good shooting, but it looked better than it was. Any of the contestants could have equalled it. Cal, his eyes on Aurelian, reloaded.

Mooney McGee thought he knew what his friend Aurelian could do at a pinch. He took an envelope from his pocket, and set it edgewise in the crack of a soapbox. He stepped off twenty-five yards and faced Cal Collins. "Twenty-five dollars says Reely cuts the envelope first shot."

Aurelian could have wished Mooney elsewhere. He did not care to have the redoubtable Cal Collins know how well he could shoot. But to go back on a friend was impossible.

"The devil himself couldn't hit that envelope, Mooney!" snarled Cal. "I can hardly see it."

"Reely can see it," returned Mooney McGee. "And that ain't all." He returned to the packing box and laid the tip of a lean forefinger on the head of a protruding nail on the edge. "Twenty-five dollars Reely drives the nail with his second shot."

"Done," sneered Cal.

"I think I'll clean my gun first," said Aurelian.

"You'll need to do more than clean your gun," was Cal's gratuitous comment.

Aurelian said nothing and began to clean the fouled weapon. He had no fear of the outcome. Not for nothing had he tested in his thorough manner the ivory-handled six-shooter.

"All right," said he, and stepped to the twenty-five-yard mark cut by Mooney McGee. His right arm flipped up and down, up and down, the sixshooter spitting flame and smoke at each flip. At the first shot one half of the

envelope fluttered whitely to one side. At the second the nail disappeared.

"Pay me," said Mooney McGee.

Cal complied none too graciously. "Anyway," said he, "Reely owes a round of drinks for the crowd." Which crowd was considerably augmented in numbers by now. Sheriff Maxwell and Corny Burgoyne were both there. So was Sugar Roebuck. "Here's something for you to shoot at, Reely," continued Cal Collins, taking a handful of silver from his pocket. "Here's six cartwheels. I'll throw 'em up in the air. A hundred to fifty you don't hit 'em all in six shots."

"Let Mooney McGee throw 'em up and I'll go you," said Aurelian, realizing that it was no use attempting to conceal his proficiency any longer, and slipped home two rounds to replace the spent shells.

"Here y' are," Mooney," said Cal. "Give 'em a good toss."

Mooney whirled up his hand. The silver dollars flew twinkling in the air. Aurelian began firing before the silver pieces started to fall. At the sixth shot the multitude gasped. Aurelian O'Riley had knocked spinning every dollar of the half-dozen.

The face of Cal Collins was dark with rage. "Good shootin', Reely!" he said loudly. "But the silver dollars weren't shootin' back at you. I'll give you a mark to shoot at. I'll shoot you for first blood!"

As he spoke the hand of Cal Collins flashed to his gun-butt. And as he spoke those of the spectators who were in the vicinity of Aurelian sprang backward. Every one of them knew that the gun in Aurelian's right hand was empty. Every one expected him to fall at Cal's first shot. As Cal's right hand dropped, Aurelian's right hand shed the useless six-shooter and flew under his vest. His left hand, held on a level with his belt buckle, snapped backward thrice so swiftly that the eye could not follow the

motion. Three shots that sounded almost as one. Aurelian's waist was wreathed in smoke. The expression on Cal's scowling face changed to one of ludicrous astonishment. His gun barely cleared the holster when it fell to the ground. His hands clawed at his neck. He took three steps forward. "Why—" he muttered. "Why—" Slowly, as the axe-smitten tree falls, he toppled forward on his face. He had gone to seek elsewhere the answer to his question.

For a long minute there was silence as dead as the body that lay on the ground. Men could not immediately adjust themselves to the fact that the man they had expected to see killed was very much alive.

Then Sheriff Maxwell and his first deputy went to Cal Collins and gently turned him over. "Three shots across the board," said the sheriff. "Two in the lungs and one in the heart."

"He asked for it," said Corny Burgoyne matter-of-factly.

"An even break," pronounced the sheriff.

"Want me, Sheriff?" inquired Aurelian, halting beside the sheriff. He did not look at the result of his work. With remarkably steady fingers, he was reloading the walnut-handled six-shooter he had pulled from his waistband.

"No, Reely," replied the sheriff. "We all heard him, I guess. Plenty evidence to satisfy the coroner. You might stick around town to-night. We'll have the inquest after supper."

"I was goin' to stay, anyway," said Aurelian. "I'll be at the hotel when you want me."

The sheriff nodded, and Aurelian went back to where he had been standing, picked up the ivory-handled six-shooter and began to cleanse it of the dust with his handkerchief. The crowd watched his every movement with the nice respect that is ever accorded the victor. Which

respect was not unmixed with conjecture as to what Ruff Lanigan would do when he heard the news.

"He knew your gun was empty, all right," said Timbo the blacksmith as he and Aurelian, Ruidoso and Mooney left the field together. The crowd moved determinedly after them.

"That second gun fooled him," said Duidoso.

"Fooled me too," said Mooney McGee. "Couldn't see it under your vest a-tall, Reely."

"I've been carrying it thataway since yester—since I—uh—got it back," Aurelian said, wondering at his own ability to speak and think so calmly.

Killing a man in actual stand-up fight he had expected to affect him adversely, at least to some extent. Yet he was no more emotionally excited or depressed than he had been after killing the three renegades, or the Mexican and redskin rustlers he had occasionally served in similar fashion. He experienced no sense of exultation however. It was as though he had killed a rattler or a wolf—an all-in-the-day's-work feeling.

He looked over his shoulder. "What's the crowd following us for?"

Mooney McGee coughed delicately. "I expect they ain't forgot that round of drinks you owe."

"That's so," said Aurelian, and waved a hospitable arm toward the Silver Saloon. "Come on, boys, it's on me."

Red and Timbo were still with Aurelian when he left the saloon a quarter of an hour later. Almost the first person they met was Gabby Weston.

"Howdy, boys," said the long-legged attorney, sniffing the air. "I seem to have missed an auspicious occasion."

"I never saw the feller in my lul-life," said Red, with a hiccup. "But you sure missed several drinks."

"Then come with me," offered Weston.

"Not another one," said Aurelian firmly. "I feel good right now, but any more and I'd try and push the bridge over."

"Oh, all right. By the way, has any one seen Cal Collins?"

Red and Timbo looked at Aurelian.

"I saw him," said Aurelian with suitable hesitation.

"Reely and Cal had a li'l target practice,"explained Red. "Cal wound it up final by bein' the target. And the joke's on you, Reely, after all. How you going to collect that hundred dollars?"

"Then Cal did not survive being the target?" queried Weston.

"Not exactly," said Timbo the blacksmith.

"That's a blow," declared Weston. "I was counting on Cal as a customer—eventually."

Aurelian cocked an eyebrow. "Eventually?"

Weston nodded. "Yes, I was arranging to sell Ruff and Cal the Lazy S, and I've just found a slight flaw in the title that will require a month or two to clear up. That's what I wanted to see Cal about. Now I'll have to send word to Ruff. Oh, well, if it isn't one thing it's another. See you some time."

Aurelian went to the wagon yard to feed his team. Mechanically he traded Sugar Roebuck out of six-bits worth of feed for four bits, and mechanically he put on the *morrals.* He inspected the team harness and the wagon, half hoping to find something to repair. Queer how work helped a man to forget—for a time at least. It was a good deal better than whisky. No morning-after headache.

But memory worked overtime after supper, when he was sitting in the wagon waiting for the inquest to begin. It would be unbearable not to go to the Lazy S any more. Never to look on Peggy's face again. He had been so sure at the last—so sure. And now, "Come day, go day, all

same Siwash," as a friend of his from the Kootenai used to say.

He did not speculate as to Peggy's reaction to the killing of Cal. It wasn't necessary. She had released him from his promise. But as it turned out, he had kept that promise to the last letter. He had neither sought out Cal Collins, nor planned his downfall. The onus, if any, rested entirely on Cal Collins; and there within the hour the coroner and his jury verdict squarely placed it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE WHITE SANDS

I

Aurelian, by the coroner's dictum free to depart, in the morning hitched up his two big Missouri mules and rolled out of Rosebud toward the basin's western wall, a wall that stretched due north and south apparently. But actually the range ran considerably east of north. Opposite the Black Hill, the first landmark on the way across the plain in solemn procession until, where the road veers southeast after passing the northern point of the Sands, Oscura, Capitol Peak, Sheep Mountain and the cone of the steep Salinas are an enveloping arm of peaks and pinnacles reaching across the desert as though on guard against the black and scowling menace that is the Malpais.

Humped on the wagon seat, his eyes on the dust devils careering northward through the greasewood and mesquite, Aurelian had ample time for reflection. While he no longer had to consider Peggy and her troubles, he had enough of his own to keep him occupied. Cal was a spent shell in his grave, but Ruff Lanigan was still a live cartridge. He had shown Ruff where to head in, and had outsmarted him likewise. Ruff would never rest content until he had done his worst to even the score. It was Ruff's move. Precisely what shape that move would take it was impossible to say. But that he would not move as clumsily as Cal had moved was a foregone conclusion.

If he could employ Lincoln County outlaws once, he could do it again. Aurelian had an uncomfortable feeling that the impending roundup was apt to be an exciting affair. He had done what he could to draw a good hand.

Bill Jackson and Ruidoso Red were coming out on the morrow to ride circle with George and himself, and bringing with them a third man, a brother of Timbo the blacksmith, to drive the wagon and cook. With George and himself there would be five men in all. Aurelian hoped that Ruff, should he decide on immediate hostilities, might be disagreeably surprised.

The wagon drew abreast of the Black Hill. Over the wagon tongue were the yellow hillocks that marked the point of the White Sands. They did not loom blufflike this morning, but crouched low behind their buttresses of rolling yellow dunes.

Slowly the Drag R wagon creaked and rocked over the chuck holes across the flat to where the road turns sharply into a gap between two dunes, a low one and a high one, the higher lying to the south. At the turn was a deep chuck hole. The front wheels of the wagon dipped down. The wagon tongue swung sidewise and upward and cracked the near mule's lowered head under the chin. The near mule flung up his head, leaped against the collar and snapped a hame strap.

If Aurelian had not been an excellent driver more damage to the harness than this would have resulted. But by quick action and harsh words he managed to avert what might easily have been a distressing catastrophe. The team quieted, Aurelian descended to effect repairs. He always carried strap leather, baling wire and rawhide strings in the wagon box.

But repairs went badly that morning. In the first place his knife was not in his pocket, and he spent a quarter of an hour hunting for it in the wagon bed. He didn't find it. Nor in the wagon box was there a single nail. So he was forced to use rawhide to replace the parted hame strap.

He loosed the reins from the wheelspoke to which he had tied them, climbed over the wheel and started the team. The near mule, always a quick starter, hit the col-

lar a split second ahead of his team mate. The rawhide stretched and snapped with a whang.

All in all, when Aurelian had completed the second repair, this time using twice as much rawhide doubled, the wagon had been behind the sandhill the better part of an hour. Aurelian had lit a cigarette and was on the point of freeing the reins, when he noticed that both mules, ears pointed, had turned their heads toward the western end of the sandhill.

It was evident that they saw or heard something. Heard it, decided Aurelian, because there was nothing in sight on the levels to the west except greasewood and mesquite, sagebrush and soapweed. The wind was from the south, a gentle breeze, but he could hear nothing as yet. The mules continued to stand at attention.

Something or other was certainly coming from the direction of the White Sands.

The Southwestern mode of life in those days bred caution in a man. One in Aurelian's position, who had defied the unscrupulous, was doubly concerned to be watchful. Aurelian took a rifle from beneath the wagon seat and climbed the sandhill to where clumps of sage growing on the top afforded a concealed observation post.

He saw the rider before he was fairly settled—a man on a chestnut horse coming at a walk directly toward the sandhill. That he had not come from the roundup road was evident, because he was heading in the general direction of northeast, and the roundup road lay to the east. Nor had he come from the Drag R or any of the passes through the mountains leading to the Jornada because in that case he would have been riding on the wagon road or across country to the west of Aurelian's sandhill.

Without a doubt the horseman had come directly out of the White Sands.

Why? Men did not ride the White Sands for pleasure or honest business. The region was one to be avoided

—except by those who wished to avoid other men.

Aurelian squinted his eyes against the sunshine and continued to stare at the horseman, now not more than half a mile away. He judged that the man was making for the gap between the two dunes through which ran the road. Greasewood and mesquite grew thickly at the base of the larger sandhill as well as along the road beyond, where it trailed out of the gap and straightened its ruts across the flat.

There was nothing familiar about this rider, nor about the horse either—at first.

"He's goin' a long ways," said Aurelian to himself. "He could trot now if he wanted to, but he's savin' up for the better goin' north."

The sun was behind the stranger and the horse's head was in shadow. Suddenly the horse tossed up his head, and Aurelian saw the white blaze that marked his face. Aurelian recalled that one of Peggy's chestnut riding horses was a blaze-face. But her chestnut had four white feet. Aurelian could not see the horse's feet. Too much brush. But in front of the rider was an open patch perhaps forty yards across. The horse walked out of the brush into the patch and Aurelian saw that he had four white feet. Aurelian did not hesitate. Peggy had bidden him good-by forever, but—

He went down the side hill in great leaps.

Back to the wagon he raced. The mules, their ears pricked, had not yet brayed. Probably they would not be moved to sing until they saw what they had been hearing. But one can never tell what a mule will do. Feverishly Aurelian dumped the contents of two sacks all abroad in the wagon bed, rushed to the mules' heads and sacked them both. Then with the wagon rope in one hand and his rifle in the other he ran through the gap and dodged into the brush at the western end.

The rider, a middle-aged sunburnt man with a brown

spade beard, was singing "The Dreary Black Hills" as the chestnut carried him toward the gap:

"I got to Cheyenne, no gold could I find,
I thought of the grub line I'd left far behind;
Through rain, hail and snow, frozen plumb to the gills—
They call me the Orphan of the Dreary Black Hills."

It was then that a rope whisked out of the brush, a loop settled round the neck of the Orphan of the Dreary Black Hills, snaked him out of the saddle and smacked him heavily to earth.

The chestnut sprang forward as the rider rolled backward over his tail, but stopped as the reins dropped. The Orphan, dazed by the shock, rolled over. But before he could collect his scattered wits sufficiently to get to his feet, or even reach for his gun, Aurelian ran out of the brush, kicked him under the chin with the toe of his boot and laid him senseless.

Aurelian led the chestnut to the wagon, rope-tied him to the tailboard, removed the sacks shrouding the mules' heads and came back to where the Orphan sprawled in the dust, breathing stertorously. With application of fist and boot, he set to work to restore the Orphan to consciousness. Unless the man was able to satisfactorily explain his possession of the chestnut horse he had every intention of making him a permanent settler.

II

"Feelin' better?"

The Orphan rubbed his jaw. "No thanks to you, Stranger."

"Where did you get that horse?"

"Bought him."

"Where?"

"At the Lazy S."

"You're a liar. That horse ain't for sale."

"If I had a gun—"

"I got it and there's no need to feel in your boot. I found the bowie you carry there. You didn't rustle that horse, either. I might have thought you had if you weren't using the lady's own saddle and bridle, and carrying in one saddle pocket the sandwiches she fixed for herself. They're fresh-made, those sandwiches, thin bread, like a lady makes. Where is the lady that horse belongs to?"

The Orphan's face paled beneath the tan. But he was no weakling. "How the hell—" he began hardily.

Bang! A smoking six-shooter lay in Aurelian's hand, and a neat hole appeared in the crown of the Orphan's hat.

"Where is the lady?"

"I didn't—"

Bang! The Orphan clapped a hand to his right ear. It came away reddened. He looked at the blood stupidly.

"I'll bore your other ear if you don't start your memory a-tickin'," said Aurelian. "*Man,* you don't know how I'm a-honin' to kill you!" Bang! "I told you. Tell me where she is, or I'll plant my next bullet between the first two."

"She's down in the White Sands." Sullenly, as blood trickled down both sides of his jaws.

A cold chill ran icy fingers up and down Aurelian's backbone. "Is she hurt?"

"She wasn't when I left," came from behind the Orphan's spade beard.

Aurelian stood up. "You'll get on your feet and walk around the bend to where a wagon and team is. You'll unhitch one of the mules, crawl him, and backtrack your trail to where you left the lady. I'll ride the horse, and I'll be right behind you."

"That's your proposition," said the Orphan brusquely

and sitting tight. "Here's mine. If I take you back to the lady, I go free, huh?"

The next instant he was flat on his back, gasping for breath, and choking on two teeth. He struggled into a sitting position and coughed out the two teeth.

"I ain't bargainin' with you," said Aurelian, in a voice that shook. "I killed Cal Collins yesterday. I'd just as soon kill you today."

"Who are you? Huh? *Him?* Jus' a second while I uncramp my legs. I'll lead you back to her, and you won't see me makin' any crooked moves, not a one. Anyhow, I don't need to bargain. You'll let me go after you see her."

"If you're countin' on tolling me into an ambush," said Aurelian, "you won't live long enough to pat yourself on the back."

"No ambush a-tall." The Orphan got stiffly to his feet. "But damn my luck, anyhow! I saw your dust a while back, and I figured to pass behind you."

"I know you did. I saw you lookin' for me over west before I roped you."

III

Trotting, always trotting, to the aching discomfort of the Orphan riding bareback, they traveled deeper and deeper into the waste of dunes and draws and humps that are the White Sands.

Not until they were five miles in from the last soapweed did Aurelian speak. "How much farther?"

The Orphan growled, "Not much farther. Behind that li'l hill yonder."

Aurelian had been suffering the tortures of a damned soul since his identification of the chestnut horse, and his eyes throughout the ride had been restless as a hawk's

from necessity of guarding against treachery on the part of his captive. In spite of the fellow's words, he fully expected an ambush. Because to his mind it was not reasonable that Peggy Gordon should be alive and well in the White Sands unless other men, friends of the Orphan, were with her. Because unless she was under restraint, there could be no adequate reason for her remaining in the White Sands.

He had not, in the Collins affair, possessed the slightest desire to kill. But now he had that desire. It was a consuming lust that soaked his body with perspiration but left his brain as cold as ice and his nerves as steady as a boulder.

The Orphan straightened his humped shoulders. A six-shooter clicked behind him. "I wouldn't try any warnin' yells, if I were you," said Aurelian.

"Got a crick in my back. I told you I'd play square."

Aurelian made no comment. Mule and horse in single file pressed on through the Sands to the little hill, passed along its base and debouched into a wide draw running at a right angle to their line. Aurelian's heart bounced painfully. Because, in the center of the draw, not a hundred yards away, the solitary figure of a woman was sitting on the sand, holding the reins of a saddled horse. And the saddled horse was one he knew well and bore a familiar brand.

"There you are," said the Orphan. "I told you she was O. K."

"Ride on," said Aurelian.

The woman stood up. She dropped the reins and walked toward them.

"Get down," said Aurelian to the Orphan. Then, when the man was on the ground, "Back over there against the ridge."

He dismounted himself, being careful to retain the magic of the drop.

"You all right, Mis' Gordon?" he asked when she came near, his eyes on the Orphan.

"Of course I'm all right—thanks to him."

"Him? Who?"

"That man you're pointing the gun at," was the sufficiently surprising answer.

Aurelian did not lower the weapon. "What do you mean?"

"Why—why—" she hesitated, "you aren't keeping him a prisoner, are you?"

"Looks like it. How did he get your horse?"

"I gave him my horse for his," she said quietly. "His own was played out. You must let him go, Reely."

"Not until I know what's back of this."

She laughed. "You're making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Haven't I a right to trade my horse if I want to?"

"Depends on what you traded him for."

"I told you that I traded him for that other horse."

"Then that's one reason why I can't let him go. That horse is Jack, a Drag R horse. The fellah's a horse thief. He stays with me until—"

"Reely! You can't do this! You must let him go."

"No! Go back and climb on Jack. You, fellah, crawl that mule again. We're leavin' here."

Not once since dismounting had Aurelian looked into her face. He had kept his eyes on the Orphan. He saw the latter glance quickly at the girl. Then he heard Peggy draw a long breath. The next instant her arms were clasped around his waist, pinioning both his arms. "Run!" she screamed. "Run!"

The Orphan leaped at the chestnut horse. Aurelian tried to jerk loose his pistol hand, but Peggy was no weakling, and desperation gave her muscles extra strength. She clung to him like a limpet, her face burrowing into his flannel shirt. They swayed to and fro, Aurelian, angry

though he was, nevertheless striving not to hurt her.

He dropped the rifle and managed to get his left arm free as the Orphan crawled the chestnut and whirled the horse around. But Peggy's body was pressing into his stomach the gun he carried in his waistband. He could not pull it out. Bewildered and raging, he saw the Orphan race around the base of the little hill and vanish.

"He's gone," he said to Peggy.

But she still clasped him tightly. "I can't let go until you promise not to chase him."

These promises! George was right. Petticoats hampered a man. But Aurelian was a person of resource. "Lookit comin' over the hill!" he cried.

Peggy turned her head quickly, her grasp loosened a trifle, and Aurelian jerked loose and ran. He could hear her boots slithering after him. But it was he who reached the horse first. Scooping up the dropped reins, he vaulted into the saddle. Peggy, two yards away, dived like a football player at Jack's head, caught the reins at the bit, and held on.

"I might have known you'd play a trick like that!" she panted. "Why don't you hit me over the head with your gun!"

"I ought to!" he snarled impotently. "Helpin' a horse thief!"

"If that's the way you feel, why don't you ride me down?"

With hot and angry eyes he stared at her. With human contrariness he was all the more furious because he had had his worry for nothing. She had apparently been in no danger. Then his sense of humor came to the rescue. He laughed and swung to the ground. "I cave. You can have him."

She released the reins and stood back. "Thank you for nothing. You couldn't catch him now, anyway."

"I expect you're right, Peggy—I mean Mis' Gordon."

She gazed at him, an expression on her face he could not fathom. "Oh, you can call me Peggy. We can be friends, you know."

"Can we? I wonder."

"Let's not discuss it. You might tell me how you—you happen to be here."

IV

"Now I'll tell you my end of it," said Peggy Gordon.

"Don't unless you feel like it."

"That's an ungallant thing to say. It would serve you right if I didn't tell you a thing. But I'll forgive your bad temper—this once. I was riding west toward Sulphur this morning when I rode out of a draw right into the middle of a herd of eighty or a hundred Lazy S horses held by five or six men."

"Rustlers?"

"Rustlers. Before I could turn back, they caught me."

"Where were your boys?"

"They started early and went up Cottonwood. These men, and they were all tough-looking customers, didn't hurt me, but they wouldn't let me go. About twenty minutes later two more men, the man you let go and another, drove up twenty-five or thirty more horses, and they started the whole bunch south toward the Drag R."

Aurelian started. "George was there! If—"

"He wasn't there. There wasn't a soul about the place. So that part's all right. The men, some of them, rode into your horse pasture, and drove out the horses in it. They cut the wires—"

"Wait a shake. Was the wind blowing at the ranch?"

"Hardly a breath. The mill at the upper well wasn't turning."

"Then I expect George was pumping at the lower well. But—"

"Let me tell you, Reely. They cut the wires of a section of the west fence and hazed your horses through."

"All of 'em?"

"Fifty or sixty head, I should say."

"Then they got all of 'em in the pasture. No wonder you kept that part of it dark. You might know I wouldn't let one of those jaspers get out of my hands if I could help it."

"I knew that, but you see I'd promised him he could go, and I had to keep my promise somehow, no matter what it cost me or you or any one. You can understand that."

"I see how you look at it," he replied enigmatically. "Go on."

"Well, they drove the herd south along the fence, and they argued together what to do with me. I was growing more and more frightened. They didn't mince words." She paused for breath.

Aurelian's hands slid up and down the barrel of his six-shooter. His face was dark with various emotions. To think he had believed her to have been in no danger; had even been angry with her because she apparently needed not his help. Self-recrimination clawed him bitterly. He realized how far into the Valley of the Shadow she had penetrated perhaps even better than she did; especially did he realize it a moment later when she went on with, "Then three of them, of whom the man you saw was one, rode a little apart talking together. I couldn't hear what was said. Finally, when we reached those Indian fireplaces south of Hembrillo—they were heading for the old Spanish Road—the trio who had been talking together came over to where I was riding between two others, and this man said, 'You come with me,' and one of the other men, with a grin I didn't like, said, 'He'll take care of you.' *He* looked pretty desperate, but not as bad as some of the others.

"Anyway, he led me east right out into the Sands. If I'd been frightened before I was frantic now. Wasn't it in the Sands that Colonel Fountain and his little son disappeared? Exactly." As Aurelian nodded grimly. "Well, I asked this fellow what he was going to do with me, and he just grunted. We were going deeper and deeper into the Sands, and I was about ready to faint. He'd been fingering his revolver too, and *that* wasn't a help. Don't look like that! I'm here—and it doesn't matter does it?"

"Go *on!*"

"Suddenly he turned and said, 'Lookit here, Miss. You've seen too much for your own good. Your evidence, if we're ever caught, would dump us sure. Those other fellers elected me to take you in here and see you never got out. But damme'—he used worse words than that. They all did—'if I can see it through. I never hurt a woman yet. Tell you what—I'll leave you here and not even tie you up, if you'll give me your word to stay right in this place four hours. I'll need that much start.'

"My heart almost burst with relief. But I was so upset I could barely get the words out. I noticed he hadn't asked me to promise not to testify if he or the others were caught, and I said as much. He looked at me hard and said, 'I don't believe in puttin' too much of a strain on a woman's promise. It'll be enough if you promise what I asked you. I ain't ever going to see any of those other fellers again, anyhow, and you can stick a pin in that. I better take your horse, Miss. He's a whole lot better than mine.'

"So he did, and I stayed and then you came, and—and that's all. It was eleven by my watch when he left." She drew her watch from her belt. "It's a quarter past three now."

"Then the time's up fifteen minutes, and you can do your part helping to get those horses back. You can't af-

ford to lose your saddle stock any more 'n we can. You take—"

"But the horses are gone, Reely. The rustlers have several hours start, and it will be ten or twelve hours more before you can get enough men—"

"We got the cattle back, didn't we? And how much start did they have? Days. Don't you talk to me, Peggy. I know what I'm doing."

"Yes, sir," she said meekly, folding her hands and standing before him in a submissive attitude.

He scowled at her suspiciously. "Stop fooling," he commanded, "and pay attention to me—"

"How bossy you are," she murmured; "quite—quite as if we were still engaged."

"Now that's a nice thing to sling at me! A ni-ice thing!"

"I won't do it again," she cooed demurely with downcast eyes.

"What are you grinning about?" he demanded. "Do you think it's funny to fool folks the way you did me? Throwin' me away like I was an old shoe? You needn't think I care. Not a bit."

"Oh, I'm sorry." She raised her eyes briefly. "I—I hoped you did."

"Sure you do. Any woman would. Indians, all of 'em. And you needn't think you can change your mind again, either. I wouldn't marry you now if you asked me on—on your knees."

"Wouldn't you?" Oh, such a still, small voice.

"No, I wouldn't. Now you listen hard. Take Jack and head for the Drag R. If George ain't there yet, go down to the lower well and tell him what's happened, and for him to drive in the Grandview bunch—the rustlers didn't comb Grandview, did they? No?—and wait for Minnesota. Since they've cleaned your ranch out of saddle stock, those horses will be needed for the ride south.

What? Sure, after you've seen George you ride on to Cottonwood and tell Minnesota. Tell him, and tell George too, that I've taken out after the rustlers on the mule here with a rifle, and I'll hang to the trail till they catch up with me. Eight men in all, you said?"

"Seven or eight."

"They've lost one, and we'll be five, so that's all right. Better get goin'."

The knuckles of her clasped hands showed white. "Reely, I—oh, take care of yourself!"

"I always do," he told her gruffly. "Not that it makes any difference to you."

Her eyes sparkled with temper. "What a child it is! Snapping and snarling because its cake's been taken away."

This was certainly adding insult to injury. He felt like shaking her till her teeth rattled. The flirt! "Here's your cayuse. Climb on him and keep moving. So long."

Jack and his rider trotted north about the sandhill, and Aurelian backtracked to retrieve his rifle. He mounted the mule and headed southwest. It would be a long chase, he expected. But if only George and the others caught up before the rustlers could cross the Rio Grande, all would be well, very well. Because six or seven men encumbered with a horseband are not quite a match for five other men not so encumbered. He himself would have the hardest part to play. A long and bareback ride on a mule is far from being a pleasurable pastime. He was realizing this already.

He thought of the wagon and the mule he had left in the gap between the sandhills. He knew that Bill Jackson and the others would find them the next day. Probably they'd go hunting him too. But that couldn't be helped. A man can't provide for every contingency.

Aurelian, topping a sandhill—he had been able to follow draws the first mile or two—was not a little amazed

to see a big dust opposite the point where the mountains taper off between Hembrillo and Four Troughs. He checked the mule and squinted against the sun. There was practically no wind, and against the base of the high ground the big dust hung like a mushroom—a ragged mushroom, the stem pointing north, the head shredding and thinning to the south.

Aurelian looked away and away to the south where gray San Nicolas Mountain stoops to meet the plain. There was no other dust in sight.

"Dust's too thick and bunched for cattle," Aurelian said to himself. "It's a horse band all right—ours for a bet. Now why is it moving north? C'mon, mule!"

The mule sat on his tail and slid down the side of the sandhill to the bottom where he gave vent to a snort of fear and shied like a colt, spilling Aurelian plump on his face. Aurelian—he had been using the driving reins for a bridle—was dragged twenty feet at the full stretch of the leather before he could scramble to his feet and jerk his mount to a standstill.

"Dumped by a mule!" he muttered in shame. "Like any school kid. Sanded my rifle too. Now—" His mouth opened fishwise as he perceived that which had caused the mule to shy so wildly.

Swiftly he knotted the driving reins around his ankle, dropped to his knees and, like a badger going to ground, began to dig with his hands into the base of the sandhill.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE WATCH

I

AURELIAN, the White Sands behind him, went across the harder surface of the red sand and the yellow at a smart gallop. He was heading straight for the big dust, now slightly to the north of Hembrillo. He swept over the break of the sand into the mesquite at undiminished speed. Two miles farther on he began to ride more circumspectly, and came to a dead stop at the corner of his horse-pasture fence. He climbed the corner post and looked out over mesquite and greasewood where the dark shapes of many horses were moving beneath the rolling dust cloud less than a mile away. He counted fifteen riders, all mounted on bay horses. An odd number in more ways than one. A horseman riding the drag whirled to cut back a light-minded animal, and Aurelian saw the sparkle of bright metal.

"Cavalry!" breathed Aurelian. "If that ain't luck!"

It seemed to the mule that never in all his varied existence had he run as he was forced to run during the ensuing two minutes.

A sergeant reined back as Aurelian came up. The latter waved an arm. "Howdy, Sarge," said he, his eyes on the horse brand. "You seem to be doing me a favor. Lieutenant Saunders along?"

"Up ahead," coughed the sergeant, "out of the dust where I wish I was. If I ever take on again, I'm going to join the ordnance."

But Aurelian was already out of hearing. As he rode past the horse band and its attendant guard of cavalrymen his quick eye told him that there must be at least a

hundred and seventy head of saddle stock in the band. The soldiers had nabbed the lot.

In advance of the bunched column of tossing heads rode three tough-looking customers with hands bound and bridle reins fastened to the pommels of three cavalrymen, one of whom, a corporal, wore a reddened bandage round his head. Three hard citizens where there had been six or seven.

Aurelian galloped on to where a lone officer attended by a trumpeter on a white horse rode in dustless state. The officer turned in his saddle as Aurelian raced up.

"Why, Reely," he said, eyeing the mule, "they must have cleaned you out completely."

"I guess they did," admitted Aurelian. "But I wasn't at the ranch when it happened. I was driving a wagon from Rosebud when I—uh—heard the news. I never really appreciated a saddle till right now. How come?" He flicked a thumb rearward.

Lieutenant Saunders grinned like a cat. "All luck, my dear fellow. And what luck! I was coming north from San Nicolas Spring when I met this horse band heading south. I noticed the six men driving bore an untrustworthy appearance, and that the horses were branded Drag R and Lazy S, but they swore they'd bought the animals. Of course I didn't believe them, but I was helpless. The Army is so utterly bound by regulations, you know. Any deviation means a court martial or something. But luckily my sergeant, O'Brien, has a good eye. He saw one of our horses in the bunch, one that had escaped from my own detail last month.

"*That* simplified matters. I put the men under arrest at once. They didn't take it in good part, and grazed one of my corporals. Which simplified matters even further. My men fired upon them and killed three. The other three are back there under guard. You must have seen them as you passed."

Aurelian nodded a delighted head. "I did! I did! And we sure are obliged to you, Lieutenant. I'd like to return the favor. If you'll just turn these three boys over to us, we'll take care of them for you. Save you takin' 'em to Stanton."

"That's a kindly thought, Reely, but I can't do it," regretted the officer. "The Government wouldn't like it. These three boys will have to go to Leavenworth unless they try to escape."

"I hope they try to escape," said Aurelian, and related in detail Mrs. Gordon's nerve-racking experience.

"Reely," said the lieutenant. "I heartily wish I could turn them over to you. Lynching is too good for them. To think of that exquisite creature being— Trumpeter, ride back and tell Corporal Mack to dismount the prisoners, loop lariats under their arms and march them the rest of the way. If they won't march, drag 'em. You will remain and assist the prisoners' detail. And, oh, Trumpeter, tell the corporal not to permit any loud or boisterous language on the part of the prisoners. And—and—that's all."

"There is more than one way to skin a steer," said the lieutenant five minutes later. "I can't look, Reely, but you can."

"The detail is yankin' 'em along off to one side out of the way of the horse band. They don't seem to like it. One of 'em's flopped down. There go the other two!" Aurelian began to laugh. "Ol' detail hauled 'em through a bunch of mesquite."

"I didn't imagine the corporal would require a diagram. Isn't the trumpeter doing anything? He's a bright child, as a rule."

"He's kicking them to their feet."

"Splendid! I knew I could depend on my boys. I'll see that our friends have a lively time all the way to Stanton. If anything had happened to that angel—"

"Lieutenant, I have to tell you. We ain't engaged any more."

"No! By Jove, I'm sorry. I—I—Reely, how do you suppose that cavalry horse got in with that stolen bunch?" A man of tact, Lieutenant Saunders.

Aurelian gratefully explained the matter, adding, "I was going to notify Stanton first chance, Lieutenant, but when I was in Rosebud yesterday and this morning, what with one thing and another turning up, I forgot it. Here's some more things turning up. Look at 'em ride!"

Here they came, George and the Lazy S boys.

"Where were you when all this happened?" asked Aurelian, when the tale had been told. "The lower well?"

"And a damhealthy thing for the rustlers I was," exclaimed George, slapping his chest. "I'm good for three horse thieves any old time."

"Is that so?" said Aurelian. "There were seven of these burlies."

"Seven, huh! Well, in that case, it would have been a help to have you load for me, Reely. As I was sayin'—Hey, that's my horse you're kickin', you ape! Want me to spill you? What's the matter!"

"The butter!" said Aurelian in hushed tones.

"Butter? What butter?"

"Why, the butter I thought I'd get for you. Don't you like butter, George?"

"Sure I like butter. But you never bought any butter for the ranch before. What—"

"I just thought of it. I slid the tarp back to get out my rifle, and the tobacco and sugar were right under it."

"You mean to say the butter's been laying out in this sun all day on top of the tobacco and sugar?" George yelled in anguish.

"Well, I ain't sure," hesitated Aurelian.

"I'm sure! It's the sort of fool trick you'd play! Butter! My—! Now you can just nicely slip right out

and bring the wagon in before you sleep to-night!"

"Who? Me?" protested Aurelian. "Cut in two pieces like I am! You're crazy. What's your hurry? Bill Jackson and Red will find the wagon to-morrow afternoon and fetch it in."

"What do you suppose the tobacco and the sugar will be like by that time, huh? Reely, if you had any more sense you'd be half-witted!"

George was off like the wind. Minnesota looked from his dwindling back to Aurelian's solemn face. "Reely, where *did* you put that butter?"

"There ain't any butter," Aurelian replied gently. "I never said there was. I was careful not to. I just wanted to get the wagon in without delay. Suppose now ol' Red and the other two are a day late? The mule's like to dry up with thirst. Lend me that bale wire on your saddle, will you, Minnesota? I want to mend that section of cut fence right away."

II

In the evening, after the Lazy S outfit had gone off with their horses, Aurelian questioned the three prisoners. But they either stared at him sullenly or cursed him with heartiness, according to their separate inclinations. He quickly perceived that there was no information to be obtained from them. Stiff-necked and high-stomached, they would incriminate no one else. So he left them, his sole comfort being that the corporal and the guard had dealt with them thoroughly, and were not indisposed to deal further. For by this time the details of Mrs. Gordon's capture by the rustlers were known to every soldier.

Aurelian returned to the kitchen, where Lieutenant Saunders was playing Old Sol by the light of the kitchen lamp, hooked a chair against the woodbox and tilted back comfortably.

"Reely," said the lieutenant, shuffling the cards, "don't you ever clean this lamp chimney?"

"I don't dast to. The soot is all that holds it together. Dim light's better for the eyes, anyhow. Keep right on playin', Lieutenant. Don't jump if I shoot."

"Shoot?" The officer looked startled.

"Rat," explained Aurelian succinctly. "He just looked out of a hole in the corner yonder. But he dodged back. He'll look out again, and I'll get him."

The lieutenant went on playing. Aurelian, ivory-handled six-shooter in hand, waited patiently. Within the minute two points of light showed at the rat hole. A small shadow oozed from the hole. Bang! The six-shooter in the confined space of the kitchen roared like a cannon. The small shadow leaped high in the air and came down flop on the floor.

"Got him," said Aurelian, and crossed to where the rat lay and picked it up by the tail. Opening the kitchen door, he threw the remains outdoors. "It's all right," he called, hearing the thudding of rapidly approaching cavalry boots. "Shot a rat, that's all."

Aurelian shut the door, turned to go back to his chair and stepped on a rounded object that rolled under his boot sole. His foot flew from under him and he fell forward on hands and knees. The rounded object skittered across the floor and struck the lieutenant's boot.

"What—" began the officer, leaning down from his chair, and picking up the free-rolling object. "Oh, the bullet."

Aurelian rose to his feet and glanced down at the flooring and the baseboard in the corner where he had shot the rat. "Lead glanced off the floorboard against the baseboard on one side, caromed off the other side of the angle and flew out on the floor. Hard pine baseboard and flooring. Got 'em out of ol' wagon beds."

Aurelian resumed his seat on the chair. Idly the lieu-

tenant rolled the bullet to and fro under one finger. "Now that's odd," he remarked suddenly. "Your gun has only five grooves, Reely."

"What's the usual number?" Aurelian asked without much interest.

"Six. Our army pistol has six. Five is very unusual. A land opposite a land and a groove opposite a groove is the rule. With five grooves, lands and grooves are opposite each other. I don't recall ever having seen five-grooved rifling before. By Jove, I have too! But damme if I can remember where."

Aurelian began to laugh. "Reminds me of an ol' feller I used to know when I was a kid back in Hartford. Used to be in the ordnance, and worked for the six-shooter people when I knew him. Great friend of my dad's, and he was always and forever arguing for the five-grooved rifling. A land should always face a groove according to him. Funny old codger." He cocked a listening ear. Hoofs, the noise of wagon wheels, and a Voice, uplifted, but not in song. "George is back. Our George. He must have made that wagon roll to get here so quick. What? Yeah, he led out a couple horses to team in with. That mule I left is particular who sides him." The door flew open. "'Lo, George. Did you find the butter?"

"Here it is," replied George, and lightly tossed a brown paper bag at Aurelian. Instinctively Aurelian made a baseball catch, the bag split and at least a quart and a half of kerosene oil deluged his shirt and trousers.

III

The cavalry did not leave the Drag R in the morning. The lieutenant decided that his mounts needed two or three days' rest before undertaking the long hitch to Fort Stanton.

Hence it was that, late in the afternoon, the officer,

with Aurelian and George, was sitting on the bench outside the kitchen door. A few yards along the wall of the ranch house, a sentry stood at ease in front of the door of the blacksmith shop. Near the corral the portable forge was smoking itself out. The surface of the ground round about it was considerably plowed and torn by hoofs. One of George's sleeves was ripped from shoulder to wrist and Aurelian's brand new overalls and shirt were stained with charcoal.

"Yep," Aurelian was saying, "once you throw a horse to shoe him you've got it to do always. Take that Teniente pony. He used to be all right, just a li'l fussy maybe about liftin' his feet, but if you'd take your time and go at him easy you'd shoe him. But George here, Patient George, we all know him, he was rushed to set down and rest himself, so instead of wrasslin' along with Teniente he throws him. Do you guess you can shoe Teniente now without you throw him? Just try it, if you want exercise. Yeah, it ain't the fault of the horses if they're hard to shoe; it's the men who handle 'em."

"That's right," assented Lieutenant Saunders, "if a horse is hard to handle, the reason can usually be traced to the human element."

"I expect many a good horse gets spoiled, all right," said George. "So do shirts and pants."

"And a dirty Irish trick that was!" Aurelian exclaimed indignantly. "I boiled those clo'es for an hour and they've been hangin' out ever since, and you can still use any part of 'em for lampwicks."

"I like butter," said George. "Spread it on bread, with maybe a spoonful of lick on top."

"George—" began Aurelian, "I—Lookit comin' around the corral: Mr. Ruff Lanigan, very hot and sweaty, Counselor O'Keefe, dripping like a sponge, and Corny Burgoyne, who seems to be feelin' the heat some himself."

"Maybe Ruff wants to shoot you legally," suggested George in a whisper.

"You never can tell." Aurelian stood up and raised his voice. "Put your horses in the corral, boys, and come on in."

"Only goin' to stay a minute, Reely," replied the first deputy, riding with the others past the corral gate to the gate opening into the wire-fenced yard surrounding the ranch house. The three men dismounted outside the yard gate, let their reins fall on the ground and walked into the yard.

Both Aurelian and George watched Ruff Lanigan like hawks. But that gentleman was entirely at ease, smiled pleasantly at everybody and shook hands with Lieutenant Saunders, who did not appear to relish the attention.

"Just a li'l law matter, Reely," said Corny, producing a document of legal appearance and pressing it with firmness into Aurelian's hand. "Subpœna for you to appear before the grand jury on the twentieth of this month."

"What for?" demanded Aurelian, opening the subpœna.

"Because," said Counselor O'Keefe, clearing his throat, "my client, the estate of California Collins, deceased, believes that by reason of false pretences and representations made by you to one Ralph Squibbler, United States Agent of the Red Hill Agency—"

"To wit and aforesaid," interrupted Aurelian, "his heirs and his assigns, did seriously disturb and endanger the public peace, by quarreling, fighting and making a loud noise. You are the loud noise, Counselor, and I bet I know what's bothering your client. Those May and July steer contracts, Ruff? How about it?"

"Well," said Ruff unsmiling, "the estate wants to look into that matter a little more deeply, Reely. The estate ain't entirely satisfied—"

"Squibbler was."

"I wonder."

"No law against that. Try and get those contracts. Try it."

"Who? Me? Why me? This is the estate's suit. I'm just a friend of the estate."

"I suppose because you're friendly to the estate you came out with Corny to make sure he served me, huh?"

"Oh, not at all. Corny Burgoyne always does his duty."

"Take off the hat, Corny," said Aurelian. "Ruff is complimenting you. He's a judge of duty, Ruff is. He wasn't taking any chances I might be reported out in the hills, and no chance to serve any subpœna. I hope you sent the estate a fat bill, Counselor."

"Trust me," said O'Keefe.

"Not quite," Aurelian said with fervor, and continued to observe every move Ruff made. He was frankly puzzled. Ruff's debonair manner was incomprehensible. He should have panted for war at Cal's death. Instead—a civil suit. The Collins estate might be the ostensible litigant, but Ruff was behind it. That was certain. Was Ruff losing his nerve? It didn't seem possible.

"Guess we'll be goin' back," said Corny Burgoyne.

"Better stay and eat and sleep, all of you," said Aurelian. "It's five o'clock. You ain't thinkin' of ridin' across to-night?"

Hospitality was hospitality to Aurelian or any other Southwesterner. Enemies or friends deserved and got equal treatment in that respect. He pulled his watch to emphasize the fact that the afternoon was practically gone.

"Hands up!"

"Wha—"

"Hands up, O'Riley! Quick! Watch George, Corny! This is a murder case!"

Aurelian's hands cuddled his ears. He could not understand what Ruff was driving at, but he understood with-

out the slightest difficulty that Ruff, his gun trained on the center of Aurelian's stomach, meant business.

"George, don't you start actin' up," advised Corny, his bewildered gaze flicking at George, who was obviously on the point of boiling over and was only restrained from doing so by the deputy's drawn gun. "Explain yourself, Ruff!" went on Corny sharply. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"That watch danglin' down from O'Riley's overalls," said Ruff sharply. "It's Sam Sheardown's. I saw him wearing it the very day he was killed."

"Sam Shear—are you sure?" demanded the first deputy.

"Sure I'm sure. I can swear to it. I mean that design around the rim. There's funny-lookin' letters inside the case. I saw 'em once when Sam opened the watch and set it."

"Hold still, Reely," said Corny. "Let's look. Ruff, you watch George. Here's some funny-lookin' letters all right, but I can't read 'em."

"I know who can," cried Ruff triumphantly. "Sam's sister!"

"Suppose it is Sam's watch," said Aurelian. "I got it—" He fell abruptly silent.

"Where'd you get it, Reely?" queried Corny.

"I don't remember," said Aurelian calmly. "What of it? George, shut up! *Shut up!* Corny, you can't arrest me for havin' a watch Ruff says belongs to Sam. How do you know Ruff's tellin' the truth?"

"Don't you fret about me telling the truth, feller," rejoined Ruff. "It's Sam's watch, and you'll have to do more than tell the truth to get past a jury—especially if you don't remember where you got it."

"I would be up a stump if I couldn't do that," said Aurelian, with a placidity that dumbfounded his brother and Lieutenant Saunders, and not a little amazed the

other three. "Tell you what, Corny: let you caper over to the Lazy S right away quick and show the watch to Mis' Gordon and hear what she says. Better yet, we'll all go with you."

"I should say you will go along!" sneered Ruff. "You don't get out of my sight until—"

"I'm running this, Lanigan," Burgoyne cut in curtly. "Reely, just gimme your word you'll surrender to me personal and peaceable if Mis' Gordon identifies this watch, and I won't even take your gun away until and unless she does."

"It's a whack," said Aurelian.

"You're speakin' for George too."

"He is *not!*" declared the younger brother. "I make my own promises and I don't—"

Aurelian wheeled toward George. Only George and Lieutenant Saunders could see the violent triple wink bestowed upon George. "Shush, George," said Aurelian. "We're all friends here. Let's catch up our horses. You needn't go followin' me into the corral, Ruff. I mightn't like it, and I can't promise too much for George."

"I'd stay right here with me, Ruff, if I were you," suggested Corny, "and I'd put that gun away. You ain't the sheriff—yet."

George turned back at the corral gate to wriggle contemptuous fingers. "Yet! Ha-ha-hah-h-h-h! *Yet!*"

"You needn't stand in front of me, Corny," Ruff protested, and holstered his weapon. "I know what's what, and I'm sure satisfied to make it a murder case instead of a civil suit."

"So you're the man behind," murmured Corny. "I was wondering. Not that it makes any difference."

"Not a bit." Ruff lit a cigarette with great cheerfulness.

"Reely," said Lieutenant Saunders, who had followed his friend into the corral, "I don't believe it for a min-

ute. That Lanigan couldn't tell the truth if he tried."

The countenance Aurelian turned on the lieutenant displayed a genuine concern. "I hope he's telling it now."

"What! That the watch actually belonged to Sam Sheardown?"

"You bet I hope so. Say Lieutenant, Bill Jackson and Red and Timbo's brother ought to be along soon. I'd be obliged if you'd tell 'em how come George and I ain't here, and to just do the best they can for a while until—until somethin' happens."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

JAIL

I

"This is certainly tough on me," said Aurelian, as he rode away from the Lazy S in company with George, Corny Burgoyne, O'Keefe and Ruff Lanigan. "When will I be tried, Corny?"

"Damfino," replied the first deputy gloomily. He liked the O'Riley boys, and it had deeply hurt his honest soul when Mrs. Gordon had not only identified the watch as the one she herself had sent to her brother on his last birthday, but had explained that the queer-looking letters were simply "S.S. from M.S." cut in an old style of engraving known as Black Letter, the "M." being the initial of Margaret, the diminutive of which was Peggy. Of course, Mrs. Gordon had scorned Ruff's charge, but in the absence of any contrary evidence, there had been nothing for it but the arrest of Aurelian.

"Can't you remember where you got that watch, Reely," Corny Burgoyne inquired for the sixth time, and it must be confessed, with irritation. For it was not like his friend to suffer a lapse of memory. "Think again, Reely."

"I have, and I can't," replied Aurelian. "Ain't the moonlight bright to-night? Makes the White Mountain glow like a Mexican opal, doesn't it?"

"Oh, damn the White Mountain! Can't you remember what you did or where you were the night Sam was killed?"

"I was in Rosebud all right, because I remember goin' out after White Mountain Pete with Minnesota and Ruidoso Red the next day when Minnesota brought word

to town about Sam's team comin' in without Sam and *with* the buckboard a soppin' mess of blood. Yeah, I remember that, but it puzzles me what I was doin' the night before, the night Sam was killed. And I'll bet it'll puzzle anybody else to remember. Why, it was a year ago, Corny. Do you remember what you were doing on a given date a year ago? Not bein' an accomplished liar, you don't."

"I suppose not. It's sure an odd number all around. Ruff, he identified the watch, but Minnesota and the boys couldn't. They never saw it before, and I know I never did."

"What does it matter as long as Mis' Gordon identified it as Sam's?" Ruff tucked in smoothly.

"You know Ruff's right," Aurelian said earnestly, smacking his saddle horn by way of emphasis. "Daddy's li'l helper. Goin' to be the next sheriff of Rosebud County, Mr. Lanigan is. He told me so, his very self. Yep, and pinnin' the murder of Sam Sheardown on me is going to help him a heap with the voters. Don't you think so, Ruff?"

"Sure I do," came the endorsement from the dark shape at the extreme right that was Ruff Lanigan. "Law and order, that's me, and folks appreciate a feller like that." Even Corny Burgoyne laughed. "And you can put down a bet," pursued Ruff, "when I'm sheriff, my deputies will put the handcuffs on suspected murderers and not treat 'em like best friends."

Corny Burgoyne spat on the ground. "Is that so? Well, lemme tell you, Lanigan, you ain't sheriff yet, and any time you don't like the way I treat a prisoner you can take a running jump off the top of Salinas!"

"How do you know Reely won't try to escape?" countered Ruff.

"Because he gave me his word to go to jail with me, and his word's good."

"Of course you wouldn't understand anything like keepin' your word, would you, Ruff?" called a silky voice from the rear.

Ruff turned in his saddle. "I didn't notice you'd dropped back, George."

"Oh, I've been ridin' here some time. I got a notion you might think Reely was tryin' to break his word, and take a shot at him on the strength of it, so I took steps."

Ruff's eye caught the glint of moonlight on metal below George's right hand. "Is pullin' your gun one of the steps?"

"The first one. If necessary, shootin' you will be the second."

Counselor O'Keefe promptly went cold as a North Briton in a snowstorm. These infernal cowmen were entirely too free with firearms!

"Where you goin', O'Keefe?" queried Ruff.

"I think the traveling's better off to one side," replied O'Keefe, and hastily put ten yards between himself and George's possible objective.

"That's right," said George. "I *might* miss Ruff and nick you. But it won't be intentional, O'Keefe."

"You can put your gun away," said Ruff. "I know Reely won't try to flit, and about me not understandin' the value of a promise, George, why, I'll go into that with you after this business is settled."

"Any time, Ruff, any time. But—my gun stays so until Reely is safe in the calaboose."

"And you want to be sure he stays safe in the calaboose, Corny," said Ruff. "I didn't like the way you let George keep Reely's gun instead of takin' 'em yourself, and I didn't like the way he and George confabbed together just before we left the Lazy S. George, he talked private to Mis' Gordon right before that. For all you know, the two of 'em may be cookin' up some scheme

to pry Reely loose from the jug. The lady was engaged to him once," he added darkly, "and—ugh!"

Ruff went backward out of the saddle with Aurelian on top of him. Corny Burgoyne, always considerate, dismounted slowly and took unnecessary time to give his reins into the keeping of the delighted George before diving into the thrashing tangle that was Aurelian astride the body of the prostrate Ruff.

"I guess that'll do, Reely," said he, wrenching the top dog from his prey. "I'll get his gun."

"I chucked that off in the brush first thing I did!" panted Aurelian, and contrived to drive home a couple of kicks into Ruff's mid-section that drew from the receiver an anguished whoop as long as a lariat. "I'm sorry, Corny, but I didn't think going to jail peaceable applied to Ruff."

"Don't apologize, Reely. It's all right. He had it comin'. You certainly knocked the talk out of him. Look at him wiggle. Well, I guess we'll be goin'. You better stay with Ruff, O'Keefe, and help him locate his gun or somethin'. Tell him when he feels better to go on about his business, if any. We don't want him with us. S'long."

II

"That's the most amazing thing I ever heard of," observed Gabby Weston in a tone of voice pitched carefully low, because of the proximity of Aurelian's cell to the jail office. "It certainly puts a crimp in the accepted version of Sam's death. Told anybody else beside George?"

"Not me. I thought I'd better keep it dark until we knew more. We don't want to spoil a chance like this by springing it too soon. I don't know how we can fit it in with the watch. That'll be your business."

"My dear Aurelian, I'm a lawyer, not a magician. Now shut up, will you, and let me talk. I believe there's a con-

nection, but I also, in my humble fashion, know the law. Without several missing links, it would require Star Chamber proceedings to connect the two."

"But, Gabby, nobody else knew—we didn't, and Minnesota, Tom and Dick, they didn't, and if anybody should have known he had such a watch they should. Only his sister knew, as far as we can discover. His sister and—Ruff Lanigan. If Ruff recognized the watch, then it follows like a tail does a dog he must have taken it from Sam's body."

"He might have, but how can you account for its pawning by Jack Hard in El Paso? Jack Hard can't be Ruff. Hard, you say, spent forty-five days in El Paso jail this winter. Now I personally have seen Ruff Lanigan in Rosebud at least once a week for the past year. If we could get hold of Jack Hard—"

"That would be a job, all right."

"Nevertheless, Jack Hard is important. I'll send a trustworthy man to El Paso to locate him if possible. But don't get too enthusiastic. From what Mrs. Gordon told George, the watch was shipped by registered mail from England on the first of June last year. Sam was killed on the twenty-seventh. Allowing for delays, the watch could easily have only reached Rosebud the very day Sam was killed which would account for Sam's friends not recognizing it. But Ruff might have been in the post-office and seen Sam open the box, and Sam might have shown the watch to him. I'll see the postmaster. He'll have a record of registered mail."

"Ruff didn't say where he saw it. All he did was identify it."

"He's not telling all he knows until he gives his evidence before the grand jury. He thinks he's got you up a stump, and he knows the less I have to work on and the less time I have to work with, the harder it will be for the defense. He'll gain several days by the delay."

Aurelian's face fell. "I was counting on that watch hanging him."

"Not if he can prove he saw it in the post-office, or elsewhere for that matter, and you can depend upon it that's his ace in the hole. Yes, I wouldn't pin too much faith on the watch, Reely. The chief male witness for the territory is no fool and you must bear in mind that, although neither the Lazy S boys nor any other of Sam's friends except his sister ever saw the watch before, I dare swear that any number of Mexicans will be prepared to bear witness that they saw Sam Sheardown with the watch in his possession. I shall certainly find it necessary to call on the El Paso pawnbroker in order to stave off your own indictment without even thinking of having any one else indicted. Don't look so down-hearted, Reely. I'm merely taking into consideration certain contingencies. I don't want you to become too enthusiastic."

"So I notice, you grave digger!"

"Have a stogy and cheer up. Here."

"Want to kill me? Gabby, when I get loose, I'm going to send to El Paso and buy you a box of real cigars."

"Thanks, but I like these better. Ah-h! a man can taste a smoke like this! Smell the aroma."

"Is that what you call it? I thought the match you dropped had set fire to my boots. I don't suppose the forty-five bullet I found would help either?"

Gabby shook his head. "Not in a country where sixty out of a hundred men carry forty-fives."

"That's what George thought, but—" Dispiritedly Aurelian put his hand into his pocket. He withdrew it, his brow puckering. "I know I only found one bullet. Here's two. Now where—well, sure enough, I remember now. The other is the one I got out of White Mountain Pete's saddle at the Lazy S. Forty-five's, both of 'em." He regarded the bullets lying in his palm without interest. They rolled to and fro as he tilted his hand. Suddenly

his eyes narrowed. He picked up first one bullet and then the other, closely examining each. "Here, Gabby. See anything odd about these pieces of lead?"

"Why, no," the lawyer replied, after a moment. "I can't say that I do. What *is* odd about them?"

"Each of 'em has five grooves."

"What of it? Hasn't the rifling of every six-shooter five grooves?"

"The army gun hasn't, and the army gun is rifled like mine with the walnut handle. Look at your own six-shooter."

Gabby Weston immediately pulled his gun and counted the grooves in the muzzle. "You're right, six grooves."

"That ivory-handled six-shooter I got from Sugar Roebuck has five grooves," declared Aurelian in a tone of suppressed excitement. "I wouldn't have known it only Lieutenant Saunders spoke of it when he was fooling with the bullet I shot a rat with last night. Sugar Roebuck said a Mexican sold him that six-shooter. Bill Jackson said he saw Ruff Lanigan wearin' that gun. He recognized it by a yellow streak on the ivory butt plate. Ruff denied ownership when I asked him. If he lied, and the gun was his, this Mexican could have stolen it from him all right. If you could find out what Mexican sold it to Sugar, and then put the fear of the Lord into the Mexican so he'll tell you the truth, it might help."

"It would help a lot provided—"

"There's always something. What now?"

"Provided the company which made the ivory-handled six-shooter with the five grooves didn't make a million of 'em. What make is it? That firm, huh? They're in Hartford, aren't they? Where's the gun now?"

"George has it."

"I'll see George and get the number, and then I'll shoot George across the mountains to Lava Station with a telegram to the six-shooter people."

"Good idea, and tell George to stay in Lava until the answer comes."

"You bet I will. I'll keep the bullets, Reely."

"Look here, I wouldn't ask Sugar about the Mexican until the last, Gabby. He might talk."

"Sugar's a clam where I'm concerned. I'm his lawyer. I'll see Sugar right away, but as to the proper time for interviewing the Mexican, I'll use my judgment. *He* might talk. Although the gun should be enough to convict Ruff, I'll try and locate Hard. Have to send a man to El Paso to see the pawnbroker in any case, and this afternoon I'll drive out to the Drag R with the six-shooter and talk to Bill Jackson. What? Oh, the grand jury meets on the sixteenth. It will be a six-day session, at least. But I'll see that your case is taken up first, and on this new evidence, to say nothing of the pawnbroker's, you'll be freed and Ruff convicted before they go out to dinner. The civil case? With Ruff indicted, I don't believe the estate of Cal Collins will push that to any extent. Take care of yourself, Reely, and above all, don't take any long walks. Hey, Lem, unlock the door, will you? I'm leaving. What's that, Reely? Mis' Gordon's ranch? Oh, I'll have to find another buyer, I suppose. I'm not worrying. Hurry up, Lem."

III

"Here's your dinner, Reely," said Lem, the jailor, setting a bountifully spread tray on the chair seat that served Aurelian as a table.

"Looks like an extra good feed, Lem."

"Mis' Powers brought it herself, Reely."

"Mis' Powers? I thought she went back to Three Rivers with ol' Tom!"

"She did, but she came back the way the cat did. Keeping Flo company. Dineen ain't much good, round the

house, crippled down the way he is. Yeah, Mis' Powers. You know she as good as insulted me. Said I wasn't any cook. I told her plain I'd built meals for some mighty high-toned prisoners and none of 'em ever kicked yet."

"Don't you pay any attention to her, Lem. You cook fine. Set down and smoke while I eat. Any news?"

"Yes, indeed. Some of the boys are talkin' of lynchin' you," replied Lem, seating himself comfortably on the floor with his back against the door.

Aurelian laid down his knife and fork and stared. "Huh?"

"Fact. There ain't much for 'em to do now. Town's been mighty quiet for some time. No call for you to get up, Reely. My gun's right here. See? Yeah, Ruff Lanigan's been circulatin' round and bellyachin' all this and that how a trial is too good for you."

"And the boys are takin' it serious?" asked Aurelian and attacked the succulent steak without further ado.

"Some of 'em, Reely, the tinhorns and such. Speakin' personal, I'm for hangin' you legal and regular."

"Thanks, Lem. You've got a kind heart. So you think I did it?"

"Sure? Why not? But I ain't holdin' it against you. Maybe you needed the money. They say Sam had a mint on him at the time. How much was it, anyway?"

"Would it surprise you any if I said I didn't do it?"

"That's what they all say. Well, the boys have got to break into the jail first to get you, and I got two shotguns and a bucketful of shells out in the office. But of course with ol' sheriff and Corny away, they *might* wipe me out and bust in."

"Maxwell and Burgoyne away, are they? I know I haven't seen 'em for a couple of days."

"Yeah. They went away the day after you came in. Some kind of a murder up at Malpais. They're a-trailin' the murderer. Dunno when they'll be back. But I'll keep

the boys out as long as I last, Reely. You can bank on that."

"I know I can, Lem. Have a piece of pie? There's more here than I can eat. Funny how a fellah loses his appetite in jail."

"Yeah, ain't it funny? The way you've tucked away that two-pound steak makes it funnier. I notice you take a li'l coffee in your sugar. Thanks."

"You needn't act so crazy," remonstrated Aurelian, as Lem, the piece of pie in his fist, crawfished to his seat on the floor. "Anybody would think you didn't trust me."

"I don't. I've held the job now goin' on five years, and the older I get the more I realize you can't trust folks in jail. If you could trust 'em they wouldn't be in jail."

"There's something in that." Aurelian tilted an ear toward the door. "What's that thumpin'?"

"Maybe it's the boys wantin' in. I wasn't expectin' 'em before night, anyhow. I'll go see. Don't you worry, Reely, but if they do get in and take you out, the thing for you to do is jump off the wagon before they pull all the slack out of the rope. You'll bust your neck right away and won't hardly suffer a mite. You'd be surprised, honest."

Aurelian noticed that Lem was careful to lock the cell door behind him. His actions, even more than his words, indicated that the amiable Lem had a strong sense of duty. Aurelian drank off his fourth cup of coffee with an enjoyment somewhat tempered by what Lem had told him of the machinations of Ruff Lanigan. A lynching bee! He had attended a couple. It was all very well to spend a few days in jail on a false charge, but to be hanged on that charge was a cat with quite a different tail. Aurelian began to doubt that he had done the wise thing after all. Although at the time— A rattling at the door, the scraping of a key, the voice of Gabby Weston.

"You needn't come in, Lem," said the lawyer, as he

entered the cell. "If I were you I'd keep my eyes out those front windows. There's some almighty loose talk in town. Look's bad for Reely."

"I know," Lem said, "and I've been cheering Reely up the best I could. But he acts low-spirited kind of. See what you can do."

The cell door clanged. Lem's bootsoles scuffed into the office.

"Cheerful cuss, our eminent jailor," observed the lawyer, seating himself on the end of the bed. "His notion of a pleasant afternoon is attending a funeral."

"He's got me lynched already," Aurelian smiled wryly. "You don't look any too cheerful yourself."

"It may be better if we rushed matters somewhat, Reely. Since my return from the ranch this morning, I've heard nothing but talk of stretching you. Ruff Lanigan's still in town. Lord knows when Maxwell and Burgoyne will return, and Lem's alone. Of course, your friends will stand by you, but you know what a mob is."

"As bad as that, is it? What other good news have you?"

"None. When it comes to the point, Bill Jackson isn't sure about the gun."

"What? Why, he was sure enough when he talked to me last fall."

"That's different. Casual conversation is not the same as making a sworn statement. At any rate, he says that while he's almost sure it's the same six-shooter, he's not prepared to go to court and swear on the Book that it is."

"That's bad. We were depending on Bill. Perhaps somebody else—"

"I thought of that. Of course the Flying H boys are unavailable as witnesses. They'd perjure themselves blue in the face. But I made careful inquiry among men in town who know Ruff well, and while a few remember having seen Ruff wearing an ivory-handled gun at odd

times last spring or early summer, each and every one of them is as worthless as Bill Jackson when it comes to actually identifying this particular gun as Ruff's property. As to the watch, the post-office records show that a registered package from Mrs. Margaret Gordon in France was delivered to Sam Sheardown on the twenty-seventh of June, the day Sam was killed. We know she sent but the one package, and that contained the watch. So, you see, Ruff could easily have seen the watch somewhere in town that day."

"Then our last card is the Mexican who sold the gun to Sugar. What luck did you have there?"

"The Mexican left town last July right after he sold the gun to Sugar. No one—I've made inquiries—knows where he is."

"Who was he?"

"Sugar said his name was Pancho Barro."

Aurelian scowled. "I know where he is. He's dead and buried in El Paso. That fellah named Jack Hard killed him. Funny. Jack Hard's supposed to be from Rosebud too. But I can't place him."

"It doesn't matter. Even the telegram from the six-shooter people doesn't matter now."

"They answered, did they?"

"Promptly. George was waiting with their reply in my office when I came in this morning. Certainly is provoking. I believe it would have cinched the case if the Mexican hadn't lost his life and Bill Jackson his memory. Here, read it yourself."

S. A. revolver 0288993, equipped with five-and-a-half-inch barrel, according to our records, is one of five experimental weapons with five grooves and five lands, manufactured according to my own specifications. The other four pieces were destroyed. S. A. revolver 0288993 unaccountably disappeared, and since you have it in your possession, it must have slipped by mistake, under a

wrong number, into some Western shipment. According to our records, no revolvers except the said five weapons have been made with five lands and five grooves by our firm. If you will forward this revolver to us express collect we will be glad to exchange it for a new weapon with the standard number of grooves and lands.

(Signed) S. R. KILPATRICK, Superintendent
Shipping Department.

"Ol' Captain Kilpatrick," mused Aurelian. "Workin' for 'em still. I used to know him well. This sure would have cinched it, Gabby," he added wistfully, handing back the yellow piece of paper.

"Yes, wouldn't it?"

"I expect you'll be able to sell him the Lazy S after all."

Gabby gave Aurelian a shrewd glance. "Think so? Well, all I can do now is bring that El Paso pawnbroker before the grand jury and free you. Of course I'll make the point as definite as possible that Ruff seems to be the only person, aside from Mrs. Gordon, who knew that watch was Sam's. But as I told you Ruff will nullify that with perjured testimony."

"Jack Hard's our best bet now."

"I've written to my man to keep after him. It might be a good thing for you to go to El Paso as soon as you're out."

"I'll do that little thing."

"Between us, we'll hog-tie him yet. Can I do anything for you, Reely, in the meantime? Smokes? Drinks? Newspapers? No? Who's that?"

"Sounds like Squibbler's voice."

"Squibbler! It *is* Squibbler, and demanding to see you. Want me to remain, Reely?"

"I think he might talk more freely and open—whatever it is he wants to talk about—if we were alone."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JACK PLANK

I

"I DIDN'T have a thing to do with it, Mr. O'Riley. Not a thing. In fact, I did everything I could short of confessing the actual circumstances, to prevent the matter being aired in court. But—but Lanigan insisted. He's—he's a very masterful man."

Flabby-bodied, pasty-faced, his customarily red nose a bilious yellow, the Red Hill Agent sat on the edge of the chair and gazed hopelessly at Aurelian. He was utterly abject, this Squibbler, and had apparently lost ten pounds in weight.

"Of course I knew Ruff was behind it," Aurelian remarked dispassionately. "So you didn't tell him about your personal and private ledger and checkbook? *Keep your voice down.*"

Squibbler shook his worried head. "I—I didn't dare."

"Perhaps that was wise, but don't you see what will happen at the examination. I'll have to tell what I know and produce the evidence. What will that do to you and Ruff? Leavenworth, sport, Leavenworth. Ten years at least."

Squibbler shivered at the very idea. "I'd never live through it. I ain't well. I've got a weak heart."

"You're a fat liar. The elevation at Red Hill is over six thousand feet. If you'd had a weak heart, you'd have cashed in long, long ago. You're just scared stiff. That's all the matter with you."

"Perhaps that's it." It was obvious that the agent's spirit was completely shattered. "But I was in hopes we

might arrange something. That's why I came to see you, Mr. O'Riley."

"I can't help you," Aurelian told him with contempt. "You'd better tell Ruff how-come, and take your medicine."

"He'd kill me!" The agent wrung fat hands.

"I expect he'd come near it." Thus Aurelian, grinning. Manifestly the agent knew nothing of Ruff's suggestion to the "boys" that Aurelian be lynched. However, badgering the frightened agent was helping to pass a dragging hour. "With me tangled in a murder case, Squibbler, your evil day may be put off."

"Oh, they'll examine you in civil proceedings before you're convicted of the murder. Ruff will fix that. I know him. And—and I don't want to go to Leavenworth. My God! Jail for ten years! I haven't slept a wink since Ruff told me. Mr. O'Riley, how much will you take to give me back that ledger and checkbook. I'd be willing to pay a couple of thousand. I'm a poor man. But Mr. O'Riley, be easy on me! I—maybe I *could* raise three thousand, but not a dime more. Three thousand for the books. You'll never make money any easier."

Aurelian shook a lean finger at him. "Wouldn't I be a numskull to let you have those books for any amount of money? The Drag R needs those contracts. Business necessity, Squibbler. You know how it is."

Squibbler saw that Aurelian was the devil himself. "Man, you've got horns!"

"You flatter me."

"But can't you see that three thousand dollars—"

"Is bribery and corruption." Aurelian laid a forefinger beside his virtuous nose. "I'd rather have the contracts. So would George. I owe a duty to George."

"But you'll be in jail—hung maybe."

"Thank you for reminding me. All the more reason then for me to help George out after I'm gone. But of

course you'll keep the books when the July contract is filled. I'll keep my word, or George will for me. You can trust George."

The expression on the agent's face registered doubt. "Can I? I—I'd rather have the books. But—I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr. O'Riley, I'll give you three thousand dollars not to *produce* the books at the examination."

"We-ell, I don't know." Aurelian looked up at the ceiling.

"Three thousand dollars, Mr. O'Riley, and—and I'll guarantee to let your lawyer tangle me enough so that the case will fall flat."

"Wouldn't that be dangerous? Ruff is counting on you, ain't he?"

"Oh, he is," was the lugubrious reply. "But I'd escape Leavenworth, and Ruff wouldn't actually *know* you had any evidence against him. He'd think I was just a fool. He'd raise hell with me all right, but I could make out to stand that. Mr. O'Riley, can't you do as I ask? It's three thousand dollars in your pocket, and your ranch would have the contracts too. Do you want to ruin me? I never did you any harm!"

The agent thrust imploring hands at Aurelian. In another moment he would be on his knees scrabbling at Aurelian's boots. The cowman rose lithely from the bed and strolled to the window and looked out between the heavy bars. The window was in the side of the jail, but the next house was forty yards away. Aurelian had a slanting view of a section of Main Street. In the middle distance, flanking the sidewalk, stood a buckboard to which a mule team was hitched. Vehicle and pair were covered with dust. The brand on the nearer of the two mules stirred a chord in Aurelian's memory. He turned back to Squibbler.

"How'd you come—drive?" he asked, speaking casually—and in an even lower tone than he had been using.

"Buckboard. What—"

"Your mules?"

"No, the trader's at Red Hill. I—"

"How many mules has he branded Flying V right hip?"

"Four. This is his wheel team. Look here, can't we do business, Mr. O'Riley? I'm desperate, man! Three thousand dollars is a whole lot of money."

"I ain't denyin' it. Has the trader a green freight wagon with a natural wood wagon box?"

"Sure. But—"

"Shut up. This is business. Your business, you chump! I do things my own way. Trader had a new teamster when I came over to see you that time. What's his name? Jack Plank? I remember now. Jack Plank still working for him?"

"He was when I left yesterday."

"If he's still working for him to-morrow, then I guess maybe I can promise those books won't be produced at any examination and there'll be a heap of healthy doubts about there being any examination. It won't cost you two bits either. A present to you. Yeah."

The agent gaped fishwise. "Huh?"

"I told you my name was Santa Claus."

"You mean you'll give up the contracts?"

"Not at all. I ain't *that* generous. But you needn't worry, not any more, providing Jack Plank is still drawing pay from the trader to-morrow afternoon sometime."

"But how—"

"I said not to worry." Aurelian patted the agent's shoulder with a kindly hand. "Don't ask any questions. Take my word for it, and be happy. But you'll have to do your part. Leave here at once—wait, I ain't through yet—climb in your buckboard without speakin' to anybody and line out for Three Rivers and spend the night. To-morrow you can start across to Red Hill. And you mind

what I say about speakin' to anybody until you hit Three Rivers. If you chat with a single party it'll spoil the charm. Understand?"

"I don't but—"

"You'll do as I say?"

The agent gulped, but there was a dawning hope in his bleary eyes. "I will."

"That's the stuff. Gimme your gun."

"My gun?"

"Your gun. Gimme. H-m-m. Longer barrel than I like for fast work, but it'll have to do. Any extra cartridges? No? Well, the gun's loaded anyhow. Now slope—and don't forget the orders."

II

"All right, Lem, just set the tray down. Look out, you're spilling the coffee."

Lemuel instinctively glanced downward, then raised his eyes and gazed directly into the muzzle of a Colt forty-five.

"There! You did spill the coffee—and everything else! Mis' Powers will have something to say to you for busting her crockery. Whisper, Lem, whisper, and keep your paws straight up. I'll get your gun. Told the truth, Lemuel, about folks in jail. They can't be trusted—with firearms. Lie down on the bed. Oh, sure, I'll have to gag you too."

"Reely, you—" Lem murmured in part before his own neck-handkerchief forced silence upon him.

"I hope Shotgun and Corny don't get back before it's dark, anyhow," said Aurelian. "Be a joke on me if they did, wouldn't it? This will be the longest half hour I ever spent. Oh, I want your keys, bless their li'l jinglin' hearts!"

He sat down at Lem's head and rolled a cigarette.

When the stars began to wink pleasantly through the barred window, he leaned over and put his mouth to the jailor's ear. "Lem," said he, "if the boys should bust in to-night, they're due to be right hot with you, so maybe you'll have a chance to try out your notion about the proper time to jump off a wagon. So long."

Within five minutes Aurelian stood in the dark hall of Weston's house and peered round a doorjamb into the lighted sitting room. "Evenin', Gabby."

Weston lowered his newspaper and strode into the hall. "I thought I left you in jail."

"I had to quit on it. My health was beginning to suffer. In case ol' sheriff and Corny don't get back by to-morrow, you might wander into the jail, careless-like, and turn Lem loose. His gun's in the table drawer in the office. The keys are under the sidewalk in front."

Weston chuckled. "How'd you manage it?"

"I picked up a gun somewhere. Now I want you to find George. Look in the Silver first. He'll be in one of the saloons this time o' night. Tell him to saddle our horses and bring 'em to the back of your corral quick as he can."

"You'll be indicted for jail breaking."

"Wait until you hear what I have to tell you and George. Where's the ivory-handled six-shooter? You got it, or George?"

"It's in my office safe."

"Bring it back with you. Skip, Gabby. This is a rush order."

III

Jack Plank, the Red Hill trader's teamster, looked between the rough trunks of big timber down an open hillside bathed in spring sunshine and thought that life was good. He turned around, heaved another cordwood stick

into the wagon he was loading, looked squarely into the eyes of Aurelian O'Riley and decided that life was not so good. Because there was a certain something in Aurelian's eyes, and more than that, stuck in the waistband of Aurelian's trousers, was a certain ivory-handled pistol. Jack Plank flashed a wild glance behind him. There had been no one there a moment ago, but now, within thirty feet, stood that rousy jigger, George O'Riley. There was an ugly expression in George's eyes, and he was not carrying his pistol in his waistband. Jack Plank was a citizen. He recognized the procedure. His hands went up.

"What you want?" he demanded sullenly.

"A li'l talk with you," replied Aurelian. "Ol' trader said you were up Long Cañon. But we followed your wagon tracks. We've been injunin' up on you for the last half hour." Jack Plank blinked. He had not perceived any movement of Aurelian's arm, but a second six-shooter that had been in the holster on Aurelian's thigh was now in his hand. "Take off your vest. Carry your knife under the armpit, I see. Be handier at the back of your neck, I'd say. Now climb out of the cutlery harness. Just drop the outfit on the ground. Step back. Farther yet. That's it. Anything in his boots, George?"

"Not a thing."

Aurelian stuffed the teamster's knife and rigging into his own bootleg and turned the cuff of the trousers down to the ankle.

"Sit down, Brazil."

The teamster did not obey. "My name's Jack Plank."

Aurelian nodded. "I see you've let your beard grow again, but our own li'l rascal, Brazil Sharp, is under the whiskers. You want to remember I saw you a while back unloadin' a wagon at the trader's, and you'd shaved recent. Yeah."

"I didn't think you saw me," mumbled the teamster, and seated himself cross-legged on the grass. "Damme

if I know what you want to hold me up for. I ain't done a thing. You ain't officers, anyhow."

Aurelian drew the ivory-handled six-shooter from his waistband and held it sidewise by the barrel. "Ever see this gun before, Brazil?"

Brazil Sharp shook his head. "No."

"Your eyes tell a different story. Now I'll tell you one. Pancho Barro sold this gun to Sugar Roebuck last July. Right after that Pancho went to El Paso. In January you went to El Paso. You met Pancho Barro in the plaza and tangled with him. Why? Not sayin'? Wasn't it because he stole the gun from you and you were out to get hunk?"

The teamster's eyes shifted nervously, but—"I ain't sayin' a word."

"So I notice." Aurelian shoved a hand into a vest pocket, withdrew it and displayed a shiny yellow object. "Know this watch?"

Brazil drew a breath as sharp as his surname. But he managed to shake his head. He wet dry lips with a nervous tongue. His eyes veered to George. "We got you, Mister Man," said that gentleman. "You'll chat before we're through."

"No threats, George," said Aurelian. "This is a friendly business meeting. Look here, Brazil. I bought this watch in El Paso at Monte's Three Ball Emporium on El Paso Street. Sure you never saw it before? No. I'll hang it on you then. Under the name of Jack Hard you served forty-five days on the rock pile for your fraycas with Pancho. When you got out you hocked this watch at Monte's. You came up here and took on at the trader's, meanin' to get the watch out soon as you had enough money. About two weeks ago we were in Monte's, and the pawnbroker he told how Jack Hard came in after he'd sold the watch to me and raised particular hell about it. While we were in the pawnshop you started to come in, but you saw us and sloped too quick for us to see enough

of you to make your acquaintance. But the pawnbroker recognized you as Jack Hard. I ran after you, and chased you over a fence into a wagon yard. You got into the street and out of sight before I hit the gate. But I saw in that wagon yard four mules branded Flying V right hip and a green freight wagon with a natural wood wagon box. The wagon outfit belonged to the Red Hill trader, and he told us you drove the wagon to El Paso about two weeks ago for supplies. You ain't grown as full a beard yet as you had when you hocked this watch, but the pawnbroker identified you without trouble. So I guess there won't be any difficulty gettin' other witnesses besides him from El Paso to do the same. Shaved down, anybody in Rosebud can identify you as Brazil Sharp. You get the connection—now?"

Brazil's tanned face had shaded to a pale coffee color. "I didn't kill Sam Sheardown," he whispered with difficulty.

"I don't expect you did. But you can tell us all about it."

"I—I—Dineen—"

"Is a cripple. He'll never fight again. You needn't be scared of him."

Brazil's face lightened a trifle. "That's good. Four Ace Dineen is the only feller has my number, Reely. But—"

"What else is botherin' you? You got nothin' to fret about. Except you can't use the watch for blackmail, like you were meanin' to do. And maybe it's as well for you. A grizzly like Ruff is meat for a crowd, and you ain't a crowd."

"I dunno. I—"

"That's tough," said Aurelian. "There's only one thing for me and George to do, and that's take you to Rosebud. If you stay tongue-tied, the pawnbroker's evidence will hang you."

"But you just said you didn't think I killed Sam!"

"An opinion is not evidence. Besides, why should we help you out? You ain't willin' to help us. Oh, you'll hang, sport. Hang by the neck until you are dead as a skinned cow. How do you like the view?"

Brazil Sharp hesitated no longer. "I'll tell you what I know."

IV

"That will do nicely." Aurelian began to chuckle. "You sure must have had an awful head on you the morning I sent you off to El Paso."

"Huh? Why?"

Aurelian tapped the ivory-handled six-shooter. "This is the very gun I tried to give you. Remember? You said you had no use for a gun. But I guess you'd have had a use for this one."

Brazil swore. "I sure must have had a head not to recognize it. I'd taken it, you bet." He swore again. "You said Pancho sold it to Sugar? Yeah, then Sugar had it right in his store till he sold it to you. And I never knew it. My damn luck all over. If I hadn't refused the gun, I wouldn't have killed Barro, and you wouldn't have connected me with the watch. No, you wouldn't. It was the gun did that. Don't you make any mistake, Reely; even with only the watch I'd have talked turkey to Ruff when the time was ripe. And with the gun too—Aw, hell, what's the use?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE EVIDENCE

I

THE members of the grand jury of Rosebud County slouched in their respective chairs and eyed Gabby Weston without interest. Frightful bore, serving on the grand jury. Took a man away from business. Besides, Aurelian O'Riley, the prisoner in the Sheardown murder case, had escaped. Only cattle cases to pass on. Dinner at the hotel was not a cheering prospect.

Weston, the lawyer, unkinked his long legs and stood up. "Gentlemen," he said, "my client, Mr. O'Riley, late prisoner in the country jail, has returned."

"To jail?" queried a juryman.

"Not exactly. But I can produce him at any time. Mr. O'Riley, being vitally interested in the Sheardown murder, has unearthed some evidence bearing upon this matter, and has discovered a witness who saw the crime committed. Which being so, instead of indicting my client on the evidence as presented at his preliminary hearing before the justice, I would suggest that you listen to what he and the other witness have to say."

"Irregular, kind of," the foreman said. "That county attorney ain't here either. He ought to be here. Where—"

"Oh, I forgot," a juryman broke in hastily. "He's down at the Silver, belt-deep in a game of draw. Started last night, and he was behind the game till after nine this morning. But the cards are runnin' right for him now, and he told me to tell you to just fog along without him and he'll be over soon as he pulls even. Before noon, anyhow."

"Fair enough," said the foreman, himself no mean hand

at games of skill. "So I guess, under the circumstances, knowing you and all, Gab—Mr. Weston, we'll do what you want. Fetch in O'Riley first."

"One moment, gentlemen." Weston crossed to the door of an anteroom and entered. This anteroom, in which was stored spare courtroom equipment, was at the back of the courthouse on a short corridor leading to the back stairs, and consequently admirably situated for those who wished to guard their movements from the eyes of the folk who, during business hours, customarily hung about the main hall and front corridors of the building.

Within two minutes the anteroom door opened, admitting Aurelian O'Riley and Weston to the presence of a grand jury that had entirely lost its lethargic appearance and was buzzing like a hive. "My client, Mr. Aurelian O'Riley," said the lawyer simply. "May I suggest, gentlemen, that it might be well to permit my client to tell his story in his own way?"

The members of the grand jury looked upon the witness with dignity and some wistfulness. Middle-aged men themselves, to them he was youth personified. Youth that hopped out and did things, surprising things. The killing of Cal Collins had been a masterly piece of work. Several of the grand jury smiled. They were thinking of the horse with three legs. The foreman's eye glared. The smiles vanished. Aurelian O'Riley was suspected of both murder and of abstracting from the jail safe important evidence in the shape of the murdered man's watch, and furthermore he had certainly broken jail, a crime in itself.

"We'll hear what you have to say, O'Riley," said the foreman, after the witness had been sworn.

"Thanks," nodded Aurelian. "A few days ago, when I was crossing the White Sands about east of Hembrillo, I saw a pair of boots sticking out from under a sandhill. I dug around some and found two bodies—skeletons,

kind of. One belonged to the boots. The other wore moccasins."

"Moccasins!" exclaimed a Malpais man.

"Moccasins. This one had his skull crushed. No bullets that I could find. He had a receipted bill in his pocket made out by Sugar Roebuck to White Mountain Pete, debtor."

The foreman rubbed a bewildered brow. "White Mountain Pete was supposed to have killed Sheardown. I don't see—"

"You will, before the session's over," interrupted Aurelian. "The skeleton with the boots was wearin' the leather coat and other clothes of Sam Sheardown as I remember 'em when I saw him last, the afternoon before he was killed. There were letters too, addressed to him, and a notebook with his name in it. I left 'em be."

Weston solemnly laid a packet and a bundle of papers on the table in front of the foreman. "Gentlemen, here are the letters and the notebook of Samuel Sheardown, and the affidavits of five men, Bill Jackson, Ruidoso Red and the Lazy S outfit. I removed the letters and the notebook in their presence, and they depose that they saw two bullet holes in the leather coat, one in the back and one in the side, and they are satisfied that the booted skeleton is the remains of Samuel Sheardown. Of the identity of the skeleton ascribed to White Mountain Pete they are not so positive. However, White Mountain Pete is but a side issue, as it were. The important factor is the remains of Samuel Sheardown." The lawyer stepped back.

"Go on, O'Riley," said the foreman.

"Sam started across in the evening, and he was wearing this leather coat, and when I turned the skeleton over to look in the pockets, I heard a rattle like, and I poked around and found one of these bullets. I never did find the other." Aurelian laid two bullets on the table.

"Which bullet did you find in the skeleton?" demanded the foreman.

"I don't know. It ain't necessary—is it?"

"Of course it's necessary. If—"

"I don't think so," denied Aurelian. "Both bullets came from the same gun. I took the other out of a saddle that used to belong to White Mountain Pete."

"Huh?" ejaculated a mystified juryman from Green Rock.

"Him. He was supposed to have killed Sam before—uh—suspicion fastened on me."

The foreman coughed. "Go on."

Aurelian stepped forward, pulled an ivory-handled six-shooter from under his vest—his holster out of respect to the conventions common to legal proceedings was empty—and laid it on the table in front of the foreman. "Both bullets came from this gun. It's an unusual kind of gun. Standard rifling for six-shooters is six grooves and six lands. This gun has five grooves and five lands. So have the bullets."

Weston handed a yellow telegram to the foreman. "After the jury has examined the gun and noted its number and the grooves in its barrel as well as the grooves on the bullets, I request that the jury read this telegram from the firearms company in Hartford, Connecticut. And here is the watch that belonged to Sam Sheardown, together with an affidavit as to the ownership signed by the sister of the murdered man."

"There is something damned fishy about all this," a juryman stated with emphasis.

"O'Riley!" thundered the foreman, "Did you open the jail safe and take this watch?"

"The combination was right in the table drawer," replied Aurelian, "and I needed the watch to show my witness."

"Your witness?"

"The witness I shall produce in due time," Weston cut in placatingly. "While the actions of my client may have

been somewhat irregular, he was actually working in the cause of justice."

"O'Riley, did Weston give you the gun you held up Lem with?" demanded the Green Rock man.

"Not so you could notice it."

"Squibbler, then?"

"Gentlemen, please!" implored Weston. "Where he obtained the gun is irrelevant. Have you all inspected the exhibits?"

"I haven't," said the man from Green Rock, "and we'll attend to O'Riley later."

"Certainly, if you wish. May I offer a small bet—anything up to five hundred cash—that you will not only free my client, but will tender him the thanks of one of the most intelligent grand juries before which I have ever had the honor to appear."

"This is not a gambling hall, Mr. Weston," the foreman said in reproof. "I am surprised at you. Gentlemen, have you any questions to ask the witness?"

"Where did you find White Mountain Pete's saddle?" asked the Green Rock citizen.

Aurelian told him, and added, "The horse had several bullet holes in him. He was heading for his corral up at Pete's in Ash Cañon, but played out in that arroyo."

"Then I take it that you're trying to show that this gun—this ivory-handled gun here—killed Sam and put a hole in Pete's saddle?" said the Green Rock juryman.

"You grasp the idea perfectly," inserted Weston, before Aurelian could reply, "and if no further questions occur to you, I would like to produce the next witness. The first deputy is guarding him in the next room."

"Say!" burst out the Green Rock inhabitant, "why ain't O'Riley under guard right now? He's a prisoner still by rights, and—"

"That's so," said the foreman. "Weston, what do you think you're doing?"

"I *knew* my client would not try to escape," answered Weston, "but I could not answer for the other witness, so, while I kept O'Riley secreted in my home since his return last night, I put the other witness in custody."

"You could be disbarred," said the foreman. "Concealing an escaped prisoner is a statutory offense."

"So is making false cattle returns to the county assessor," rejoined Weston with a wide grin, "and—"

More than one juryman shifted nervous feet, and the foreman hastily interrupted Weston with, "Call the next witness."

"And I call attention to the fact that I represent the County of Rosebud as well as that of La Luz at Santa Fé," pursued the lawyer, not to be fobbed off so easily, "and that there has been some talk among my colleagues of investigating the Green Rock schoolhouse, road and dam contracts. Some of them are laboring under the impression, erroneously of course, that territorial funds have been misused."

The Green Rock man, who had broken out into a gentle perspiration at the mere mention of schoolhouse, road and dam contracts, endeavored to save face by shouting, "Didn't you hear our foreman, Mr. Weston? Call the next witness!"

Mr. Weston bowed. "Come, Reely."

Nor did any one venture any further remarks, as the two men withdrew, concerning the guarding of Aurelian O'Riley.

It was a very intelligent jury.

Weston returned from the anteroom followed by a frowsy-faced man attended by the first deputy, Corny Burgoyne. The lawyer flicked a thumb toward the stranger. "Brazil Sharp, gentlemen."

"Him—Dineen's look-out?—Filled out, ain't he?—Wouldn't know him with those whiskers." Thus the grand jury, *sotto voce*.

II

"The day Sam Sheardown was killed I was mighty well tanked by the middle of the afternoon. I had to go on watch at ten o'clock, so I borrowed me a saddle pony from Tranquilino Ortega y Ortiz and rode out on the road to the Lazy S. Riding sobers me up usual, but I took a bottle in case I got thirsty, and next I knew I was lying out in the mesquite looking up at the moon."

"You mean it was night?" queried the Green Rock man.

"I mean it was night," declared Brazil Sharp. "And I was cold and stiff, for all it was June. I didn't know where I was, and I felt bad, bein' sober by then. The bottle was empty too, and that wasn't a help."

The juryman with the reddest nose started to nod in sympathy, but caught himself in time and coughed with great heartiness.

"For a minute or two, like I say, I didn't know where I was. Then my wits came back and I remembered. By the light of the moon it was about nine o'clock. I heard wheels in the north, but I couldn't tell which way they were goin'. So I ran toward 'em. They weren't goin' fast, so I didn't holler. Saved my breath for runnin'. I came out of the mesquite and saw the buckboard—it was a buckboard with a horse team—was goin' west. I was close enough and the moonlight was bright. The driver was Sam Sheardown. Then I hung my toe in a root and fell flat. Right then I heard a shot. I looked up and there was a feller with a six-shooter in his hand on a horse behind the buckboard. Just as I looked up, Sam Sheardown he gave a jump and started to turn around. The feller on the horse fired again, and Sam slumped down on the seat. The team had started to run, but another feller rode out of the brush and grabbed 'em. The first feller jumped his horse to grab the team too, but the horse stumbled, went down and rolled over. The feller jumped to save himself,

but his foot hung for a second and jerked him down. His gun flew out of his hand and hit the ground within two feet of me. I haven't any use for a gun, likin' a knife better, but I reached for that one mighty thankful. I was tuckered, sort of, with running, and I figured if those two fellers found me, I might need protection."

Weston handed the ivory-handled six-shooter to the witness. "Is this the gun?"

"It is the gun," replied Sharp, and continued with, "Well, I squinched back through the brush a li'l ways till I came to open ground and there I had to stick. For all they were busy, they'd have seen me if I started across. I wasn't trustin' 'em too far. The team horses were r'aring to go and the second feller was havin' trouble with 'em. He kept hollerin' to the first feller, and the first feller he jumped up, and between holding his own horse which was thrashin' around, and tryin' to help his pardner, he had his hands full. He didn't pay any attention to where his gun went. Not then. I hadn't gone so far away I couldn't see what was goin' on. So after they got the team settled down, the first feller stayed with it and the second rode off in the brush on the other side of the road. In a few minutes he came back leading a horse with what I thought was a pack. But when he tied the horse to a mesquite not far from where I was, I saw it was a man the horse was packin', the body of a man, head on one side, feet on the other. If the breeze hadn't been blowin' from the horse to me, he'd have winded me and given me away, I was so close. But the breeze was and he didn't. I stood pat. I had to.

"The second feller, after tyin' the pack horse, went back to the buckboard, and him and his pardner lifted Sam out and carried him to the pack horse. This horse, when they came close, switched around quick, and I got a sidewise look, bein' low on the ground, of the dead man's face. It was White Mountain Pete."

"Yeah, sure," interjected the man from Green Rock. "It would be. What happened then?"

"The two fellers loaded Sam on the pack horse behind the other dead man, and as they tilted him across, I saw something bright drop out of one of Sam's pockets. The two fellers didn't see it, they had too much to do. They threw a hitch over Sam and then the first feller missed his gun. He swore and cussed and raved around and started in huntin' for it, when she clouded up all of a sudden and the moon went out like a candle. The wind switched and began to blow hard from the south, and the second feller said to the other one, 'Aw, let it go. Come back in daylight and look for it.' It was getting darker and darker, and there was sand in the wind, and the first feller quit. They untied the pack horse and went back toward the buckboard. It was too dark by then to see exactly what they did after that, and I couldn't hear on account of the wind.

"I waited a while, because I saw a break in the clouds comin' toward where I knew the moon was. When the moon showed through, the men were gone, and the buckboard was gone. The road was empty. But the wind was a-whoopin' it harder and harder and the sand a-flyin' like hail. Everything was dim-like under the moon. I injuned back to where the bright something fell out of Sam's pocket, and I found a watch."

"One moment." Gabby Weston slipped forward and took one of the exhibits from the table. "I hand you this watch, Sharp. Is this the watch you found?"

"This is the watch," said Brazil Sharp.

"What did you do with the watch?" continued the lawyer.

"I took it to Rosebud, and several months later I hocked it in El Paso."

"In the next room, gentlemen," said Weston, turning to the jury, "is the pawnbroker with whom Sharp pawned

the watch, and from whom my client, Aurelian O'Riley, bought the watch."

"Why wasn't this purchase by O'Riley brought out at the hearing?"

"Because to do so would have revealed too much to the—uh—true murderer. My client, burning with unselfish zeal to bring the criminal to the scaffold, was only too happy to suffer temporary inconvenience, if by so doing—"

"That's enough, Mr. Weston," interrupted the foreman. "I see your point. Bring in the pawnbroker and O'Riley. Sit still, Sharp. We want him to identify you too."

III

"That seems to settle it so far as O'Riley is concerned," said the foreman, as Aurelian and the pawnbroker withdrew. "He's cleared absolutely. Now, Sharp, you have not mentioned the names of the two men who participated in this murder, these murders, I mean, because undoubtedly they killed White Mountain Pete as well. Yet if you were as close to them as you say you were, you must have recognized them."

"I did recognize them."

"Who were they?"

"If I tell who they were, what happens to me? I'm told concealing evidence is a crime."

"It is. But we won't be hard on you."

"Hard?" Sharp stared worriedly.

"Not more than a year in jail."

"Gentlemen," cut in Weston, "giving the names of the murderers will involve a certain amount of risk to this witness. To delve into his reasons for retaining the watch and gun and maintaining silence would not assist the case in any way. I think it would not be incompatible with the

course of justice if this grand jury, in its wisdom, refrained from indicting him. I realize your inordinate sense of duty. I too have this sense in the same degree. So have my colleagues at Santa Fé. Gentleman, you cannot conceive with what tender solicitude they regard the expenditures of territorial funds in the matter of school, road and—"

The Green Rock man flapped his hands. "Oh, hell, boys, turn the feller loose! I want to know who he saw."

"And as I may have mentioned," pursued Weston, "there is not entire satisfaction with the cattle returns. There are some of us who believe that there are cattle, to wit: steers, cows, heifers, bulls, et cetera, in this county, upon which the lawful tax is not being paid into the treasury. May I repeat—"

"You have—twice," interrupted the foreman, "Don't do it again. If this witness gives the names of the murderers, he will merely be held comfortably in jail as a material witness until the trials. He will not be indicted. I think I can answer for the jury. What say you, gentlemen?" The gentlemen nodded in clockwork unison. "Give 'em the names, Sharp."

Brazil wet his lips. It was obvious that he was not particularly enjoying himself. Nevertheless—"The feller who shot Sam was Ruff Lanigan. The gent who stopped the horses was Cal Collins."

CHAPTER THIRTY

GAUDEAMUS IGITUR

I

DEAD silence in the jury room. The jurymen looked at each other with serious faces. Ruff Lanigan! Caught in the act! It didn't seem possible.

"Remember you are under oath, Sharp," said the foreman harshly.

Brazil nodded. "I know. It's true. I saw it—them."

"Sam was supposed to be carrying a bunch of money at the time," said the man from Malpais. "Did you see any money, Sharp? See 'em take any from him?"

"I didn't. I'm tellin' you only what I saw."

"I guess they got it, whether you saw it or not. Smart, all right. Killin' Pete first, then Sam, and ridin' off and hidin' the bodies so folks would think it was Pete rubbed out Sam. But lettin' Pete's horse get away on 'em was not so smart. Oh, murder will out—when a gent like 'Reely O'Riley clamps a-holt of its flourishin' tail." So saying, the man from Malpais rolled his quid under his tongue and drenched the exact center of a brass spittoon ten feet away. "Nice work. Spit you in the hole, dollar a shot?" he added to his left-hand neighbor.

Which sporting proposition was not taken up, because at this juncture the sheriff entered the grand jury room by a door opposite to that through which Aurelian had entered and retired. Maxwell strode to the foreman and spoke to him in a low tone.

"Is that so?" said the foreman. "Gentlemen," he turned to the jurymen. "Ruff Lanigan is below. He has somehow got the notion that O'Riley has been returned to custody. He wishes to give the grand jury evidence as to the Shear-

down watch now, so that he may return to his ranch without further delay. It seems like—opportunity."

"You bet," concurred the Malpais and Green Rock gentlemen. "He can be arrested without any trouble at all."

"That's what I thought," said the sheriff.

"What *you* thought!" snarled the foreman. "You haven't heard the evidence! By Gawd! Are you in this too? Did you know?"

"Know!" yapped the conversationalist from Green Rock. "Of course he knew. Him and Corny Burgoyne both. And it wouldn't surprise me to find out Lem was in it too. Weston, I take off the hat."

The lawyer bowed. "I thank you. I—"

"No more speeches, Mr. Weston," interposed the foreman swiftly. "Go in the other room with O'Riley and the pawnbroker. You and Sharp and Corny Burgoyne. Somebody gimme a hat. I want to copper this six-shooter. We'll see what Ruff says when I show it to him."

Two or three minutes later Ruff Lanigan was ushered into the grand jury room by the sheriff. The jurymen were pleased to note that the sheriff had not neglected to observe the formalities—Ruff's holster was empty.

"Howdy, folks," was Ruff's genial greeting, as he looked around him with a smile. "I hear Reely O'Riley's caught."

"He is with us again," was the foreman's enigmatic rejoinder.

"That's good. There's been some chat floatin' round town about where I saw the watch. From questions asked the postmaster and others by an interested party, it seems like there's a question about me recognizing this watch unless I took it off Sam. Now—"

"Swear, Mr. Lanigan," the foreman thrust forward the Book.

Mr. Lanigan took the oath with the solemnity of a

bishop, and continued with, "Now about that watch—"

"This watch, you mean," said the foreman woodenly, holding up the Sheardown watch. The jurymen shuffled their feet. Poker-faced, they stared at the witness.

"That's the watch," said Ruff. "I saw Sam takin' it out of a box in the post-office the day he was killed. He showed it to me then. Said it was a birthday present from his sister."

The foreman consulted a sheet of paper before him. "You said nothing about seeing Sam Sheardown take it out of a box in the post-office to the justice at O'Riley's hearing."

"I know I didn't," Ruff rejoined smoothly. "It struck me I'd better not give away too much at first. I was savin' it up for you folks for drawing the indictment. O'Riley's lawyer is a slick article. The less he has to go on until the indictment the better, I think. It seemed enough at that time to say I saw Sam wearing the watch, which was true. He took it out of his pocket later in the day and gave me the time. Three other men saw it too, and they can swear to it—Roderigo Baca, Hilario Sanchez and Juan Bustamente."

"They can, huh?" said the foreman, his hand on the hat concealing the ivory-handled six-shooter.

"Oh, yes, indeed."

The foreman's hand lifted the hat. "Did you ever see this gun before?"

"Ruff's eyes were steady as he answered hardily. "Never."

"You didn't drop it on the Lazy S road the night the big wind blew up a sandstorm, the night Sam Sheardown was killed?"

Something in the foreman's voice, something in the eyes of the jurymen, told Ruff the game was played out. With an unbelievably swift movement, he drew two guns from under his vest. "Stick 'em up!" he rasped at his

horrified audience. "Sheriff, don't you bat an eye! I'm leaving by the back stairs. So long."

The grand jury, the sheriff, arms cuddling their ears, watched Lanigan back across the room toward the door opening into the anteroom, on the other side of which was the door giving access to the back stairs.

Ruff backed against the door, returned one pistol to his waistband, felt behind him for the doorknob, found it, turned it, opened the door, backed into the anteroom and —it was Aurelian who struck up his gun arm and pinned it fast by wrist and elbow, but it was Corny Burgoyne who smote him across the head with the barrel of a gun an instant before Weston kicked his feet out from under him and, ably assisted by Brazil Sharp and the pawnbroker, bore him to the floor.

II

"That's all right, Reely," said Mis' Powers, with a smile. "I saw Cal Collins sliming through alleys like a weasel and confabbin' behind corrals with Roarin' Jack Shillaber, and I said to myself, 'You're up to no good, young feller'; and then I heard you were in town, so I thought I'd better let you know. Don't say another word, Reely. Pleasure, honest."

"You're a right clever neighbor, Mis' Powers, and I sure am thankin' you for the grub too. Tasted mighty good. I told Sugar you or Flo would come in and pick out a set of china and for him to charge it to me."

"Land sakes! What for?"

"For the dishes Lem busted. That was my fault."

"Shucks! What's a cup and saucer, and a few plates between friends? You and your set of china! You tryin' to insult me or somethin'?"

"No, ma'am, no. Not me."

"That's better,' she said approvingly. "I'm glad you

liked the grub. I knew you'd enjoy a change now and then from that Lem's cookin', if you can call it cookin'. Say, Reely, it ain't true about you and Peggy, is it?"

"We ain't engaged any more," he said evenly.

"Well, you know I didn't believe it when I heard it. Didn't seem as if—Oh, well, you're out of jail anyhow. I'm takin' Flo back to Three Rivers."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "Four Ace has drifted." She nodded again with emphasis. "You could have knocked me over with a feather. I came in the house—Dineen he was dozin' in a chair—and I said to Flo, 'They've arrested Ruff Lanigan at last.' And Dineen he bounced out of the chair like a jack-in-the-box. 'What's he arrested for?' he asked sharp, lookin' unhealthy. I told him, and he never said a word, just turned around and flat-wheeled into the bedroom. Flo and I, we stayed in the kitchen talkin' it over and throwin' the meal together, when I heard the corral gate squeak, and I looked out the window and there was Dineen leadin' his best horse out of the corral. I leaned out and hollered, 'Where you goin'? Dinner's most ready.' He gave me a black look and said, 'I'm goin' away, and I ain't comin' back. Look out for Flo.'

"Then he left. And that's why I'm takin' Flo to Three Rivers. Reely"—the little old lady gave him a keen look—"I wonder did Dineen have anything to do with those murders?"

"Brazil Sharp didn't say so, and he saw one of 'em done."

"One of 'em, yeah. I'll bet Dineen had a finger in somewhere. There's a lot ain't been explained. That mortgage Dineen had, for instance, and the way Sockless Hank left town. Oh, well, what we don't know won't ever worry us, I expect. When you goin' back to the ranch?"

"Gabby wants me to stick around town till to-morrow. Says he might want me to talk some more. Fool caper.

I told him all I knew, and I ought to be at the ranch right now. I've got to get a lot done before Ruff's trial."

"I saw George ridin' out."

"Gabby told me he left soon as Ruff was arrested. I wanted to see George too, and never got a chance."

III

"'Lo, George, what you doin' round here?"

"Oh, I got a bone in my leg, Reely. I just ain't able to ride to-day," replied the younger brother with a grin.

"Lazy scoundrel," grunted Aurelian, leading his horse into the Drag R corral and closing the gate. "And you're the fellah who was in such a hurry to get back to the ranch you had to leave town without seein' me. A fine example you are for the other boys. Where are they? Up Hembrillo? Sulphur, huh? Where you ought to be instead of loafin' here. I swear you can waste more time! You're as bad as Gabby. Made me hang around Rosebud until to-day, and then he told me he didn't need me after all, except to tell me the Collins Estate had decided to let their case drop. Told me to run along and be happy. Be happy! I'll bet you'll work to-morrow, Georgianna."

"Ain't you the chatterbox?" sneered George. "Remind me of a squirrel—chitterin' and chatterin' and never does say anything. Go on in the house and fix the stove."

"What's the matter with the stove?" Aurelian glanced at the wood smoke blowing bluely from the stovepipe. "Seems to be burnin' all right."

"Go in and take a look at it," said George darkly. "There's—you'd better look at it."

"If this is another one of your fool jokes, George," Aurelian flung back over his shoulder, "I'll attend to your case."

"Is that so?" said George, and began to laugh.

Because of the laughter Aurelian pushed open the

kitchen door with caution, and peered within. The stove presented its customary appearance, and was apparently most properly boiling coffee and simmering beans. What was that on the table? It looked like a large cake, three-tiered, most delectably encased in snow-white icing.

Aurelian carefully closed the door behind him. Gingerly he approached the table and poked the cake with an inquisitive forefinger. Then—one spoke from the storeroom doorway.

"I brought your cake back."

Aurelian whirled. On the step of the storeroom doorway stood Peggy Gordon. She was smiling at him, and her dark eyes twinkled. Aurelian stood perfectly still. "My cake!" he stammered.

"Your cake," she repeated, and stepped down into the room and came and stood in front of him. "Don't you remember how cross you were because your cake had been taken away? I—I thought you might like it back. Reely," she went on swiftly, "you said you wouldn't take me back even if I went on my knees to you. Did you really mean that?"

IV

"But, Peggy, why did you send me that letter?"

"Because, dear, it was the only way."

"The only way?"

She nodded. "So Mr. Weston said. Now wait! Wa-ait! You're the most impulsive man! You see, honey, I was frantic. Lanigan and Collins had killed Charley Quay because he said he was engaged to me and blocked the sale of the Lazy S. I knew they'd try to do the same to you, and—and—oh, Reely, I was so frightened! So I sent word to Mr. Weston and he came right away, and we talked it over. He said that Lanigan and Collins were busi-

ness men first, and individuals afterward. As long as they believed our engagement was blocking the sale of the ranch, they would make sure of the sale by making sure of you. They'd work together to kill you, and they'd succeed." The arms around his neck tightened. "But if they only thought our engagement was ended and that I was willing to sell the ranch to them, the affair between you and them would no longer be on a business basis. It would become a personal matter, and while they would still wish to put you out of the way, they would work as individuals, or at least Collins would, which would amount to the same thing. He said that Collins was simply rabid about that horse with three legs. Oh, Reely, I could laugh over that if it wasn't so tragic. You won't do things like that any more, will you?"

"Not if you don't want me to. Did Weston mention the contracts I got from the Red Hill Agency?"

"He did. That man picks up everything! Reely, even I—Well, Mr. Weston said that those two contracts, although valuable, were not nearly so important as acquiring the Lazy S ranch, and would be—were, rather, probably regarded more in the light of a personal affront to be avenged separately than as a business affair to be settled together."

"The man's clever," admitted Aurelian.

"Hard, though, Reely. He's hard, like you."

"We have to be—in this country."

"So he said. Oh, yes, he was most patient with me, Reely. He explained that you would never consent to my *apparently* ending our engagement and beginning negotiations for the sale of the ranch. I would have to actually break it, and for his part he would drag the sale along until—until something happened."

"Good Lord! he *said* there was a flaw in the title holding up the sale. Was that—"

"That was one of his ideas for retarding the sale. Oh,

Reely, I—it was awfully hard—it went against everything I'd ever been taught—to release you from your promise concerning Lanigan and Collins, but Mr. Weston insisted that they would in any case, but separately he hoped and believed, do their best to kuk-kill you and that it was unfair to you to hamper you in any way. So I did what he told me to do. And—and I'm not sorry."

"You heard—about Collins?"

"I heard, and I'm still not sorry. Why should I be?"

"I kept the promise anyway. And now Ruff—" He fell silent.

"I know," she said, and wiped her eyes.

She was thinking, as he was, of her brother, who, returning from the earth, had been returned to it again.

v

"I wonder why Gabby held me in town for no reason that I could see."

"That was to give George time to bring me the message that everything was all right. You'll have to take me back to the Lazy S this afternoon."

"Late."

"We-ell, after supper."

"When do we eat?" Thus George blatantly from the doorway.

"Eat?" Aurelian stared blankly.

"He wants his dinner, silly," said Peggy, and calmly kissed Aurelian before George's eyes. "You'll have to get used to that, George. Oh, I need some more wood, Reely."

George followed his brother to the woodpile, fished in a pocket and held out to Aurelian a small, cubical jeweler's box. "You chump!" he whispered, "chuckin' away a ring like that! You always were an idjit! Knowin' that, I

watched you the evening you sat on the gate, and when you hove the box I saw it hit the broken-topped mesquite at the bend of the road. Then soon as you went in the house I went out and poked around. Lucky the box was white. Go on in and give it to her. I won't tell."

THE END